

Aid and integration grievances get an airing in House of Reps

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Date : December 4, 2013

The second reading of the Australian Civilian Corps Amendment Bill 2013 in Parliament on Tuesday provided the first opportunity for the Opposition to voice concerns on the floor of the House about the integration of AusAID into the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

The [Bill](#) changes the wording in the Australian Civilian Corps Act to transfer responsibility for the program from the Director-General of the now defunct AusAID to the Secretary of DFAT.

During the second reading, Deputy Leader of the Opposition and Shadow Foreign Affairs Minister Tanya Plibersek said that the Bill would not be opposed, but took the opportunity to criticise the integration. She said that it had been “executed suddenly and very poorly”, questioned the rationale for the merger and the lack of “adequate explanation” from the government.

“I would be delighted if anyone could point to one example of where our aid programs and diplomatic programs and trade programs were in conflict. This is an absolutely spurious argument for the abolition of AusAID,” Plibersek said.

Labor MP for Canberra, Gai Brodtmann, [spoke](#) on the ongoing uncertainty faced by AusAID staff and her disappointment in the decision to cancel the 2014 graduate intake, while Melissa Parke, former Minister for International Development, [paid tribute](#) to the work of AusAID staff over the agency’s history (also citing Robin Davies’s popular [blog post on the end of AusAID](#)). Matt Thistlethwaite, formerly the Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs, [questioned](#) what the cuts to the aid budget would mean for Australia’s aid expertise and for programs in neighbouring Pacific countries. Laurie Ferguson also [criticised](#) the cuts.

On the Government side, Member for Brisbane Teresa Gambaro stated that the integration was a “necessary step in getting Australia’s foreign aid program back on track after six years of Labor’s waste and mismanagement”. She also reiterated concerns about bullying at AusAID that were published in *The Canberra Times* and raised at Senate Estimates earlier this year.

More interestingly, Liberal MP Kelly O’Dwyer [made note](#) of the bipartisan commitment to aid and development in the Parliament and spoke on the Government’s commitment to aid effectiveness.

“We want to make sure that we are spending our aid dollar not on bigger bureaucracies but instead on not only helping lift people directly out of poverty but also being able to provide the appropriate medical care and infrastructure to people in communities that desperately need them, to also help them engage and strengthen their economic independence,” O’Dwyer said.

O’Dwyer said that the AusAID integration was “not a reflection on the worth of those who work in our aid community in Australia and overseas”, but a reaction to the growth of the bureaucracy. She also reiterated the government’s commitment to the 0.5 per cent of GNI target for aid and highlighted a desire to build partnerships.

“We also want to leverage partnerships: one of the points of integrating AusAID within DFAT is that we can leverage up the relationships with private institutions and private funds that are being spent in our region so that we are getting the biggest bang for our buck and it [aid] is being used responsibly and effectively,” O’Dwyer said.

The Bill has now been moved for a third reading.