

Human Rights Day isn't what it used to be

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Former foreign ministers Bob Carr, Kevin Rudd, Stephen Smith and Alexander Downer have little in common—except that every [Human Rights Day](#), which is today, one of them would announce the list of successful applicants for funding under the Australian aid program's Human Rights Grants Scheme (HRGS).

This was the practice for sixteen years, from 1997 to 2012—ten years under the Coalition, six under Labor.

This year, there will be no such announcement. Nor was there last year, but at the time that looked like an oversight. Labor had [set aside](#) \$5.75 million for the HRGS in its 2013-14 budget. However, December 2013, just several months after a wrenching change of government, was a time of budgetary and administrative chaos. The passing of that particular Human Rights Day without the traditional funding announcement went largely unnoticed, and did not necessarily imply that the scheme had been terminated.

Subsequently, the Coalition's 2014-15 aid budget contained no visible provision for the HRGS—but this was not unusual, as the scheme was relatively small and rarely visible in budget papers and annual reports. But then, during the first quarter of 2014-15, no call for proposals was issued. Thus, only quite recently, it became clear that the scheme was no more. This fact appears to have been nowhere stated or implied by the government, or anybody else, let alone explained.

The HRGS started small in 1997-98 with an allocation of \$400,000. By 2012-13 its allocation had grown to \$3.7 million which was granted in amounts of up to \$100,000 to over [40 projects](#). To give some random examples, this funding helped to support community-based paralegals and human rights defenders in Cambodia, protected the rights of people living with HIV in China, provided free legal aid to indigent people in Ethiopia, and countered violence against women in many countries.

The HRGS was fiddly to run, especially for Australia's overstretched embassies and High Commissions, and like all grant schemes it had the potential to create headaches by funding dud proposals, or merely odd-sounding ones. By the same token, it had the potential to do a lot of good with an amount of funding that was miniscule in comparison with, let's say, the management fees paid to large managing contractors who run various 'technical assistance facilities'. Its demise will have been entirely irrelevant in reducing overall aid budget expenditure. Moreover, even though it was an unusually long-running mechanism, its demise seems not to have been preceded by anything like a program effectiveness review.

Given the unremarked disappearance of the HRGS, it is natural to wonder about the fate of some other significant but low-profile human rights budget lines within the aid program. For example, Australia spawned and has long supported the [Asia-Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions](#), and in 2011 signed a four-year, \$2.6 million [grant agreement](#) with that body which expired in 2013?14. It is unclear (for example, from [this](#) out-of-date web page) whether further funding will be provided.

Likewise, Australia has long supported the [United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) (OHCHR)—despite regularly [disliking](#) its pronouncements—and in each of the last several years has [provided](#) funding well in excess of \$2 million. However, while OHCHR's [list](#) of voluntary contributions received in 2014 shows contributions large and small from some 50 countries, it shows none from Australia.

While information is sparse, it looks rather as if Australia's aid program is doing noticeably less, and quite possibly close to nil, in support of national and multilateral human rights organisations. That's a strange look for a country that's determinedly [seeking election](#), for the first time, to a seat on the United Nations Human Rights Council.

Julie Bishop has said that Australia's Human Rights Council bid is 'consistent with our nation's history of promoting and protecting human rights'. It seems that as far as aid funding is concerned, 'history' might be the right word.

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