

In her own words: Julie Bishop on aid (part one)

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Julie Bishop's performance as Foreign Minister of the Abbott Government has been widely praised. She is uniformly identified as the Cabinet's standout performer by political commentators, an assessment shared by [the public](#). Some have gone as far as to call Bishop a [rock star](#). Even Bishop's jogs, [explains](#) Latika Bourke, have become a 'capital T' *Thing*.

It is a good thing Bishop likes running. Since becoming Foreign Minister she has faced an endlessly accelerating diplomatic treadmill. Since September 2013, Australia has twice held the Presidency of the United Nations Security Council, chaired and hosted the G20, signed three [free trade agreements](#), deployed troops to the Middle East to combat Islamic State and been thrust into playing a leading role in the aftermath of the twin tragedies of MH370 and MH17. In dealing with the most recent of these airline disasters, Bishop's negotiating skills so enamoured the Dutch that she was [honoured](#) by their foreign ministry.

Between all these headline-grabbing, high-stakes handshakes Bishop's role in repackaging Australia's aid program has received very little attention. In the eyes of the public and the commentariat, the performance of Australia's Foreign Minister is evaluated almost entirely without reference to aid. Now, that the [biggest ever cuts](#) to Australia's aid budget have severely [dented Bishop's credibility](#) on aid, it is even more likely that Bishop's concerted effort to recast development policy over the first year of her tenure will fade, unremarked-upon, into history. From this admittedly early vantage point, it is hard to see any future evaluation of Bishop's legacy being able to see much beyond the disbanding of AusAID and the severe expenditure cuts.

This two-part post kicks against the goads by documenting how Bishop sought to articulate a 'new aid paradigm'. It does so by focusing predominantly on the four key speeches Bishop made on aid to domestic audiences in her first year as Foreign Minister^[1]:

- [Address to ACFID Chairs and CEOs Dinner](#), 30 October 2013, Party Hyatt Hotel, Canberra;
- [Opening address - 2014 Australasian Aid and International Development Policy workshop](#), 14 February 2014, The Australian National University, Canberra;
- [A new paradigm in development assistance – harnessing the private sector](#), 29 April 2014,

our neighbours, for low income countries to graduate to middle-income status and beyond and for the populations of these countries to receive the benefits of economic growth.

We have seen this occur in our region over the past 40 years and this exhibition gives us that sense of history and achievement. I pay tribute to all those who have contributed to the delivery of Australian aid, have delivered to the betterment of nations in our region and beyond. Australian aid has done remarkable things and it's been delivered by remarkable people.

The decision to continually emphasise Australian aid being delivered *in our region* is a useful way of advancing a number of Bishop's key themes. Early on, pressing this theme quickly distinguished Bishop's program from that of Labor. Repudiating what the Coalition saw as Labor's geographical extension of the aid program in the Caribbean and Africa in pursuit of a Security Council Seat, by "consolidating our efforts on our neighbourhood" (Speech 2), Bishop could immediately claim to have reintroduced a measure of stability to the aid program after the uncertainty characterising the late-Labor period. Here Bishop was playing on the widely-held concern amongst the development sector that the aid program had expanded too quickly, lacked suitable quality controls, and was increasingly pursuing haphazard and unrelated objectives. Focusing *our aid* – another popular word couplet, with 39 appearances – *in our region* helped Bishop to take ownership of the aid program with an immediate sense of purpose.

But more importantly, this intense focus *on our region* aligned with Bishop's stated intention to align the aid program more with Australia's national interests. Partly, aid should be focused on our region because: "it's in our national interest to support greater growth and equity in our region, our neighbourhood" (Speech 1). It is also required because Australia has greater obligations to "help alleviate poverty in our region..." (Speech 1). For Bishop, aid is a tool for building "stability and prosperity in our region..." (Speech 1). Our neighbourhood is "where we can make the biggest difference. This is where we have a responsibility to foster peace and prosperity" (Speech 2). The deliberate repetition of *in our region* reveals Bishop's belief that "we must direct our aid to where we can make the biggest difference and align it with our national interest" (Speech 4).

There are at least three other key themes which appear in each of the four speeches. First, Bishop repeatedly emphasises the need for the aid program to empower women and girls, chiefly by creating and extending opportunities for 'economic empowerment'. The appointment of former Senator Natasha Stott-Despoja as Ambassador for Women and Girls personified this priority. Second, Bishop continues to demonstrate her passion for PNG. Each speech contains at least one illustration or anecdote from PNG stemming from her personal experience. Third, Bishop is unrelenting in highlighting the virtues of The New Colombo Plan, a "signature policy" which aims to "build long term capacity and personal and business and academic links across the region" (Speech 1).

Also telling was what Bishop avoided saying. The words *quality* (7) and *results* (13) feature far less prominently than might be expected. And not once did Bishop utter 'climate' in any of these speeches, not even as a way to talk about prevailing economic conditions, as in, for example, 'the global economic climate'. Similarly, *environment* is never used in the sense of referring to the natural world we inhabit. In fact, Bishop says little about the beyond aid agenda, her [recent comments](#) on international tax reform notwithstanding.

Another relevant question to ask is this: how do Bishop's speeches on aid since becoming Foreign Minister compare to the speeches on aid she delivered in opposition? Are these two groups of speeches marked by continuity or divergence? The word cloud below, constructed using [three key speeches](#) delivered by Bishop as Shadow Foreign Minister, strongly suggest the former, at least in terms of content.

