

'Where are the votes in aid?'
Make Poverty History Fringe Forum
ALP National Conference

Andrew Hewett – Executive Director, Oxfam Australia

Thursday 27 April 2007
ANZ Theatre, Australian National Maritime Museum
Darling Harbour, Sydney

Bob McMullen, Shadow Minister for International Development Assistance, State and Federal Members of Parliament, Sharyn Burrow, President of the ACTU, my colleague Tim Costello, conference delegates, ladies and gentlemen.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of this land.

So, where *are* the votes in aid? How many votes are there? How will this constituency influence the outcome of this year's election?

Tim has already provided a compelling response to these questions and I too will offer some observations, but then I want to take a step back and consider whether these really are the right questions to be asking.

It is clear there is a growing constituency of Australians who care deeply about combating extreme poverty around the world.

The events of 2005 – including the Gleneagles G8 summit, the Live 8 concerts, the WTO meeting in Hong Kong and the emergence of the now iconic white bands – signaled the birth of a movement, rather than its climax.

Just look at the fact that 23 million people around the world united in a demonstration of renewed will just six months ago as part of Stand Up.

One of the most significant features of the Make Poverty History campaign has been the tens of thousands of young people it has engaged. This is much more than a passing youth fad associated with white bands. On the contrary, an emerging generation of young Australians is deeply and genuinely committed to reducing extreme poverty around the world.

What we are talking about are young people who devote hours and hours of their time to the Make Poverty History movement, some even choosing to defer their studies to facilitate this commitment.

I am sure there are parliamentarians in the room who will attest to the enthusiasm and passion demonstrated by groups such as The Oaktree Foundation during their lobbying visits. Senator Andrew Bartlett wrote in October last year "they are the sort of people... whose enthusiasm is so strong it gives extra energy and motivation to old farts like me who can feel a bit tired and worn down now and then."

Not only are these young people willing to invest time in the campaign, they are also prepared to put their money where their mouth is. Speaking from Oxfam's own experience, we have seen a significant and sustained increase in young people among our donors.

The electoral significance of this movement should not be underestimated. Many of them – such as Viv Benjamin, a pivotal member of Make Poverty History's leadership team – will be voting in this election for the first time. These are not hip-pocket voters who care about interest rates. On the contrary, they are voters whose commitment to combating poverty is so strong that it is reflected in how they spend their time, how they spend their money and how they plan their future.

Another trend worth noting is the increasing link between financial giving and advocacy, not just among young people but across the board.

The Giving Australia report of 2005, found that more than a quarter of Australians – that is, around 5 million people, had donated a total of \$1.02 billion to international non-government organisations in the previous year, not including tsunami donations. This compares to a figure of \$312 million in 1997 and illustrates that donations to aid agencies have grown more rapidly than the total charitable market.

But the fact that aid agencies are attracting more donors is less significant than the fact that an increasing number of those donors are genuinely interested in our work and willing to take political action in support of it. They are well-informed, they understand the issues and they are eager for Australia to play a leading role in global efforts to eradicate poverty.

These are just two of the trends which demonstrate the ever-growing constituency of Australians committed to poverty reduction.

While readily appreciating the pragmatism involved in balancing competing interests in an election year, the point I want to make tonight is that Labor needs to take international development seriously – not simply because of the votes to be won, but because it is the right thing to do.

Labor has a long history of internationalism; working together with other nations to promote progress, security and development. Today, an internationalist approach is more important than ever before. Global interdependency is a reality. Many of the most pressing challenges we face – including terrorism, the spread of HIV and AIDS, climate change and extreme poverty – are global issues which demand global solutions.

Moreover, failing to address these challenges will have acute implications for our region. Australia has particular responsibilities and opportunities as one of the richest countries in the world surrounded by a host of developing nations.

It's also important to recognise that many of the challenges facing the world - like extreme poverty climate change - have arisen, at least in part, as a result of market failure. So, in order to effectively tackle these issues, we need an interventionist approach.

Now is the time for Labor to assert its internationalist credentials – particularly a commitment to human rights. And any genuine commitment to human rights must incorporate the right to a sustainable livelihood; the right to an effective voice in decisions; and the right to essential services, such as health, education, clean water and sanitation.

Sadly, Australia's aid program is not yet fully focused on the achievement of these rights. In fact, the White Paper on aid is virtually silent on human rights, which seems an extraordinary omission, given that in the absence of human rights there can be no real solution to poverty. Labor has the opportunity to rectify this situation.

Other nations have demonstrated the enormous benefits that can flow from a rights-based approach to development. For example, a review of the United Kingdom's aid program demonstrated clear normative, analytical and operational advantages associated with such an approach.

In addition, to the human rights imperative to invest in poverty reduction, there are, of course, compelling humanitarian reasons.

We often speak of the statistics – 30,000 children, 8000 AIDS deaths and 1400 women dying in pregnancy or childbirth every single day. Yet, while depicting the scale of the problem, these figures fail to convey the human impact. Untold stories remain hidden behind the staggering numbers and it is easy to forget that these statistics represent the loss of mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, friends and colleagues.

When we fully appreciate the impact of this loss of human life, it starts to seem a little crass to talk about the number of votes in aid.

This brings me to my next point. Quite apart from Make Poverty History's direct constituency, I believe there are literally millions of Australians who are desperately looking for true political leadership which does what is right, simply because it is right, rather than constantly pursuing hidden agendas.

The Australian community wants to be proud of its leadership – not only within our national borders, but outside of them as well.

Some recent focus groups revealed a surprising sense of competitiveness when comparing Australia to other nations. This is not surprising when it comes to the sporting field, but in this instance we were talking about Australia's social justice record and the groups consisted of young people whose primary source of information was mainstream media.

Moreover, the groups indicated a general willingness to spend more money on social justice initiatives if they were confident that the money was being spent effectively. This suggests that the Australian community's support for our aid program would increase if was unequivocally focused on poverty reduction.

I believe Australians are looking for a Government which will make its mark on the international community, not by compromising human rights and bypassing multilateral institutions, but by championing human rights and bringing leadership to the international negotiating table.

Like climate change, Australians understand that the issue of extreme poverty will not fade with the passage of time, but will grow in the fact of inaction.

Labor has the opportunity to present a vision of a strong, outward looking Australia which makes a real difference in overcoming poverty and promoting security.

It has the opportunity to offer innovative solutions to global issues, rather than contributing to the problems facing the world. To look forward at the possibilities, rather backwards with fear. This is the kind of Australia many voters long to see – a nation which is respected as a leader, not overlooked as a follower.

It is in this context of strong, visionary leadership that a genuine commitment to poverty reduction has the potential to generate widespread electoral appeal.

It is true that the challenge of eradicating extreme poverty is an enormous and complex challenge, but it is by no means insurmountable.

Within a generation – for the first time in history – every child in the world could be in school. Every woman could give birth with the best possible chance that neither she nor her baby would die. Everyone could drink water without risking their lives. Millions of new health workers and teachers could be saving lives and shaping minds.

We know how to get there: political leadership, government action, and public services, supported by long-term flexible aid from rich countries, and the cancellation of debt. We know the market alone cannot do this. Civil society can pick up the pieces, but governments must act. There is no short cut and no other way.

Yet too often we have allowed the size and the complexity of the challenge to become an excuse for inaction when, in reality, the biggest obstacle has been a lack of will. Overcoming extreme poverty is therefore less our generation's challenge and more our generation's *choice*.

As a political party campaigning to be Australia's next government, Labor also has a choice. If it chooses to demonstrate leadership in efforts to eradicate global poverty, there will certainly be electoral benefits. But, frankly, that should not be the only, or even the primary, motivation.

Let me close with the call that was issued by 23 million during Stand Up last year. Indeed, a call that was also issued by many key Labor parliamentarians. I have taken the liberty of paraphrasing it to bring it a little closer to home:

“To the leaders of the Labor Party: Be great. Fight to keep your promises – debt cancellation, more and better aid, and trade rules that help fight poverty. You know what needs to be done. Do it.”