

MEDIA RELEASE: Politicians out of step on aid

April 5th 2007

A majority of federal politicians agree with pursuing Australia's national interests and Australia's domestic industry through the aid program, an AID/WATCH report finds.

Today AID/WATCH, an independent monitor of aid, will launch a report into Parliamentarian's and Community member's attitudes to Australian aid.

The key finding is that Parliamentarians are out of step with broader community attitudes to aid. Whilst the majority of Parliamentarian's agree with using aid to benefit Australia's own 'national interest', the members of the public surveyed, support a clearer focus assisting the millions of people living in poverty in our region

AID/WATCH's research finds that 71% of parliamentarians agree with having 'the national interest' in the broader aid objective. This compares with only 14% of community respondents. Furthermore, 64% of parliamentarians agree that Australia should promote its domestic industry through the aid program. Only 11% of community respondents agree.

"This is a disappointing statistic about Australian parliamentarians, particularly at a time when relations with Australia's aid recipients, PNG and the Solomon Islands, are deteriorating. How can we improve regional perceptions of Australia and deliver real aid outcomes, when it is clear 'national interests' dominate our aid to such an extent?"

"This research really nails the fundamental problem with Australian aid at the moment, that it has no clear focus and prone to respond to the short term strategic and commercial interests rather than long term outcomes. AID/WATCH believes that unless some key changes are made to ensure aid policy is more independent of domestic concerns, our aid will continue to be hamstrung by the broader interests of Australian trade, security and foreign affairs'

Kate Wheen, Co-director AID/WATCH

The report presents a number of recommendations for concrete steps that Australia could take to refocus our aid. One simple but effective course of action is for major political parties to commit to creating a cabinet level minister for Overseas Development Assistance. This would replace the dual role currently played the Minister and Parliamentary Secretary for Foreign Affairs, where aid issues are currently subservient to the broader portfolio.

The United Kingdom Government set a precedent in 1997 when its international aid agency, DFID became a separate government department with its own minister, of cabinet rank. This separation and independence also saw a significant increase boost in the UK aid program and a strong new focus on poverty alleviation in Africa. The increasingly popular American presidential aspirant John Edwards has also made a similar policy promise in his campaign in the USA.

"This is a great model to follow. Currently, it's the interests of Cabinet, not the recipients of aid that dominate our Aid program and this a major structural flaw in the way aid priorities are conceptualised by government. By creating a minister with a particular responsibility to oversee the quality, accountability, and effectiveness of aid in the region would radically improve our international aid program.

It would have the added effect of working to improve many of deteriorating relations with pacific island nations at the moment" Kate Wheen said.

AID/WATCH will launch this report at on April the 5th at Parliament House Sydney.

Launch Details: 10:30 am Thursday, 5th April, Jubilee Room, Parliament House, Sydney
Hosted by **Lee Rhiannon MLC** with Guest speakers, **Dr Sarah Maddison**, author of recently released "Silencing Dissent" and **Miriam Lyons**, Director of the new Centre for Policy Development

For more information call Kate Wheen: 0410470781 or 02 9557 8944