

The Reality of Aid: The Reality of the Politics of Power

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"The Reality of Aid" is an annual report on how the world is helping the poor. Or, more usually, how little it is helping the poor.

This year's edition shows that official government aid continues to be a thin slice of the wealth of rich countries. A mere 0.23% of national income. Private aid is about twice this total, but is still only about USD100 billion. Miniscule compared with the multi-trillions moved around the world daily by big business.

Many development agencies will gear up their lobbying efforts. They will invade the halls of political power to argue a "fair go" for the poor. They will appeal to morals and ethics. Even common sense.

They will fail. Aid to the poor will go down. And continue to do so.

The reason that aid will continue to fall is pretty clear. Politics has stopped being about the common wealth. The greater good for the greatest number. This is a 19th century idea at best. In the 20th century, especially the last two decades, political parties on all sides have abandoned this as a political philosophy.

Some bemoan the convergence of left and right in politics. Blair's politics are hard to distinguish from Thatcher's. Even if the rhetoric is smarter, smoother and more seductive. The differences between the Democrats and Republicans are even harder to discern. Down Under politicians like Hawke and Keating showed the conservatives, like the present Prime Minister, John Howard, how to do their job.

But it is wrong to describe this as a convergence. It is a sea change. Governance in the west has moved from the idea of the common weal, to the convergence of power. The key to understanding modern politics is in understanding power. Politics these days is about the accumulation of power. Centralising. Building. Controlling.

Why otherwise does no politician turn a hair when the largest companies merge with the second largest to create huge monopolies? When single proprietors own most of the media, then merge with those who own most of the rest. When Mercedes and Chrysler merge. When AOL and Time Warner merge.

Where is the public debate about public benefit? A columnist here or there comes bleating, but the torrent of information is complimentary. The great entrepreneur is a hero. His share price soars. For what matters is not public good, but greater wealth and greater power. These are the modern gods, and serving them is good. So the mantra goes.

And politics has become the chief servant of this new-millennium modality. Politics has become the marketing framework for the convergence of more and more power to the fewer and richer. The chief weapon of political marketing is *The Believable Lie*.

That great man of integrity and honest dealing, Helmut Kohl, turns out to be a crook. Blair espouses the highest ideals of honesty and transparency, and does a behind-the-scenes deal with Formula 1 Racing millionaire, Bernie Ecclestone.

The English writer, George Orwell, predicted it would happen. That political language would come to mean the opposite of its meaning. He was writing about the dangers of Communism. It turns out he was prescient about all politics.

So war is called pacification. Invasion is called peace-keeping. The destruction of public hospitals goes by the name of community-based healthcare. The right of faith, Christian or other, to influence the beliefs of the community is eviscerated by claiming the right to separate religion and politics.

And even aid to the poor turns out to be something else altogether. Fully one-quarter of government aid (we're not talking about Oxfam, World Vision or Caritas necessarily) must be purchased in the donor country. So you have to buy a Jeep when a Lada would do. And lots more must be spent on "consultants" from the donor country. For, after all, the poor are stupid and incapable. Otherwise they would not be poor. Right?

The first thing any development worker learns is that the poor have much wisdom. But then the modern politician does not need to read Paolo Friere. I hear them saying "Who?" like a choir.