

Faith needs to be a louder voice for overseas aid

Pat Finlow argues that for public confidence in overseas aid to return, faith charities need to lead the conversation on its benefits

"WE MUST TAKE A LONG, HARD LOOK AT HOW RELIGION, OR MORE ACCURATELY A DISTORTED UNDERSTANDING OF RELIGION, HAS BEEN CO-OPTED"



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THE INTERNATIONAL development and humanitarian world was stunned and shaken by the devastating cuts to USAID earlier this year. While the full impact of this will not be known for some time, research published in the Lancet medical journal in July estimates the cuts could cause more than 14 million avoidable deaths by 2030, with a third of those being children.

While in the short term organisations scramble to find alternative sources of funding, there is another question which needs to be addressed for long-term financial sustainability: how were these cuts able to happen with such impunity?

Let us not forget that 20 years ago, the Make Poverty History (MPH) campaign mobilised millions of people globally, calling for measures to address extreme poverty and debt around the world.

What happened to that commitment and how can we get it back?

As part of that answer, I believe we must take a long, hard look at how religion, or more accurately, a distorted understanding of religion, has been co-opted to smooth the way for the cuts.

The UK campaign for the MPH culminated in a march in Edinburgh prior to the G8 summit at Gleneagles. One of those taking part was Douglas Alexander MP, now the UK's trade minister who, during a recent interview, spoke warmly of participating in the march with his family. But he also noted that the public consent for overseas aid had

since been withdrawn and while he continued to believe it was "morally right and strategically smart" to invest in international aid, he believed the argument had been lost, saying "it's not just fiscally challenged" it is also "culturally challenged".

David Hudson, co-director of the Development Engagement Lab (DEL) which tracks support for government spending on development aid, recently wrote in support of Alexander's comments, explaining the public's consent and confidence was not lost recently, but began to fall away around 2012-13.

Which again, begs the question: how did the argument get so lost?

“What happened to that commitment?”

THE LOUDEST VOICE

In considering this, I remembered a TV mini-series aired in 2019 called the Loudest Voice which tracked the emergence and rise of Fox News, conceived as a global 24-hour news network that would mobilise a conservative audience. The title is explained at the end of the first episode when the founder and CEO, Roger Ailes, gathers his team for a pep talk and explains their objective is for the conservative movement to become "the loudest voice".

In other words, to dominate the airwaves, drown out all other

viewpoints and normalise their perspectives. This inevitably meant minimising or ridiculing other viewpoints, and making it as difficult as possible for others to interject or voice an alternative perspective.

By becoming the loudest voice, they would set the agenda: not by telling the public what to think, but by shaping what we should be thinking about.

This agenda-setting means that other news stories rarely get the same airtime, such as the importance of overseas aid in saving lives, stopping outbreaks of infectious diseases and securing peace and prosperity at home.

DIVERTING ATTENTION

The DEL helpfully shed more light on this issue: its research shows that public support for aid ebbs and flows over time in line with how aware people are of its need and impact, noting that when the public's attention is diverted, its commitment to development dwindles.

To illustrate this, it also tracks what issues are of most concern to the public. Currently, economic crises, immigration and war remain the top three issues, with immigration reaching an all-time high. At the same time, it observes a significant decline in concern for global challenges, noting: "Concern for longer-term global issues is fading, crowded out by proximate, immediate and visible threats."

CO-OPTION OF FAITH

What is particularly perplexing is that so many within the Trump administration have made much

of the importance of faith to them and how they have and continue to court religious constituencies.

The inconsistency of burnishing their religious credentials on the one hand while taking action that has such a devastating impact on the lives of millions around the world takes cognitive dissonance to a whole new level.

It seems that the long-term project of conflating faith, especially Christian faith with right-wing political ideology, has become an effective shield against criticism or challenge. But as David Brooks, a conservative political commentator, wrote: many of those in Trumpian circles “ostentatiously identify as Christian but don’t talk about Jesus very much”.

We are now seeing the religious right in America actively exporting its methodology to Western Europe and beyond. A prime example of this was the Alliance for Responsible Citizenship conference in February, a three-day event in London attended by over 4,000 people plus thousands more viewing online content. Speakers included political leaders from the US, UK and Australia alongside Christian leaders and social and cultural commentators.

The majority of those contributing were from the right wing of politics and, unsurprisingly, there was a great deal of agreement, rhetoric and comment on familiar topics for this group: immigration, nationalism, multi-culturalism, globalism, family values and a critique of climate change concerns, all the while repeatedly speaking of the importance of Judeo-Christian values.

I could not shake off the feeling that this quasi-religious discourse was being used to smuggle in ideas that would otherwise not be entertained.

So, now we come to the second part of the question – what can be done about it?

TIME TO STOP TUTTING

I will be honest, I have done my fair share of tutting in recent months. A sense of impotence at the firehose of calamitous issues leaves me feeling weary and resigned to the current state of affairs in the world.

So, I tut.

But our collective tutting merely prolongs the absence of alternative voices and perspectives.

The far right clearly has the mic at the moment and has no intention of giving it up soon. So, we need to use whatever alternative means are available to us.

But what is our message?

For this, back to Alexander who acknowledged that “even if money wasn’t tight, the argument would have to be made” for investment in foreign aid. When speaking of his belief that aid is “strategically smart” he explained “we have an interest in building a stable, more equal, more safe world for our future generations”.

“It is therefore incumbent on all of us to speak up”

Similarly, Baroness Chapman, the minister for international development, spoke recently of the importance of rebuilding the public’s confidence in Official Development Assistance (ODA), a position endorsed by the DEL. Drawing on its attitude tracking, it has identified key messages which include demonstrating the impact aid makes and highlighting the global benefit in making the world healthier, safer and more secure.

To these, I would add decoupling the aid cuts from religious messaging and actively reframing development as a practical outworking of faith.

RESURGENT INTEREST

This messaging is pertinent as evidence continues to mount about a resurgent openness to and interest in spirituality. In addition to previously reporting on this in these pages, this phenomenon is regularly featured in the mainstream press and periodicals such as *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*. It is also now supported by solid research conducted by YouGov on behalf of the Bible Society that has tracked religious attitudes and behaviours since 2018.

The resulting report, the Quiet Revival, notes that both within and outside the church, young adults are more spiritually engaged than any

other living generation. Furthermore, it found that the church is in a period of rapid growth, driven by young adults and particularly young men.

In addition to higher church attendance, this increased spiritual curiosity is also marked by a higher-than-average concern for social activism. Some 79% of churchgoers agree that it is important to them to try and make a difference in the world, and the report encourages policymakers and opinion formers to take account of this constituency.

FAITH IN DEVELOPMENT

Another recent initiative to watch is the new faith in development working group, hosted by Bond, the UK umbrella body for international development organisations.

The group’s aim is to raise awareness of the role of faith in development by drawing together people of all faiths and none to create a platform for them to journey together, developing meaningful ways to collaborate across the sector, ensuring that existing evidence on the value of faith participation becomes mainstreamed. A steering group has begun to develop next steps.

The vital importance of collaboration was also highlighted by David Miliband at Chatham House, where he observed that the geopolitical flux we are experiencing is shifting the global system from being anchored by the US. But he felt there was uncertainty about what we are moving towards, suggesting it would be a multi-aligned world with different coalitions of values and interests.

If we want to see international development move back up the political agenda, we must first see the public’s attention shifted back to the positive impact of ODA, for public confidence in it to be restored and for an understanding that our own interests are deeply entwined with those we may never meet.

It is therefore incumbent on all of us, of all faiths and none, to speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves among our varying constituencies. It may involve some awkward conversations, but believe me, they will be a lot more effective than tutting. ●