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Surviving Neo-Liberalism: NGOs Under the Howard Years¹

James Arvanitakis

Introduction

NGOs fulfil a variety of roles in society that, among others, include delivering aid and assistance, monitoring, education, grass-roots political action and service delivery. One of the fundamental roles of NGOs, however, lies beyond the representation of the marginalised and voiceless or the challenging of government policy but is also integral in promoting hope within society. This is a role that is unmeasurable, unquantifiable, and seemingly intangible until it is threatened.

Historically, it has been NGOs and labour unions that have, while promoting progressive change, ensured a counter-balance to both government and corporate influence. Importantly, they play this accountability role by bringing to the public attention conduct that is harmful, immoral or corrupt. That is to say, from the suffragettes and global warming, to third-world debt and the green and pink bands, it is ordinary people that have worked together with organisations as diverse as Aid/Watch, Jubilee Australia and Caritas to raise issues of injustice and sustainability, as well as promoting a heterogenous democracy (Lyons 2001a): one in which conflicting differences fuel progress and creative thought capable of responding to crises. A democracy without independent NGOs would be one that has no formal representation for struggles that give a voice to the marginalised (Edgar 2008).

The role of NGOs in promoting a democratic culture has been well documented. Authors such as Lyons (2001b) argue that NGOs play a vital role in encouraging civil society participation and engagement. Edgar points to another inter-related and key function that is NGO engagement with government by demanding:

...explanations for the reasons behind policy decisions (that) lead and contribute to public debates, helping to ensure that government policy is not implemented upon a passive public (2008, 22).

By engaging with government and bringing their actions to the attention of the public, NGOs help to ensure that policy development and decision-making is less likely to be dominated by particular stake-holders or established interests. In this way, NGOs fulfil the important task of laying out for social judgement whether particular policy developments are fair in the manner that they consider and treat the most vulnerable members of a society. Depending upon how they 'lay it out' we are invited, encouraged or demanded to consider who will be gaining from policy decisions to advance economic growth or 'streamlined' efficiency: and our response is reflective of where our democratic principles lie.

¹ John Howard served as the Australian Prime Minister from March 1996 to December 2007.

The neo-liberal and neo-conservative politics of the Howard government (while in power from 1996-2007) recast the idealism of NGO charters' as socially unfashionable and naïve, while the Howard government's policies sought to undermine their effectiveness. Reflecting on the Howard years we can see how this demoralisation of the work carried out by NGOs also weakened an important social medium for the channelling of hope in Australian society.

In the following analysis I will draw on my experiences to explore Joan Stapple's (2008) argument that in a healthy democracy NGOs act as a kind of mirror for social aspirations. In this way, I will suggest that their existence is not only critical because of the tangible work they undertake, but also because they reflect our belief that a better and more just world is possible.

The aim of this paper then, is twofold: the first is to present the strategies that the Howard government used to undertake a sustained attack on independent voices from civil society. Armed with the combination of neo-liberal and neo-conservative ideology, the Howard government forced many progressive NGOs to fight for both their legitimacy and very existence. The second aim of this chapter is to discuss the survival strategies of progressive NGOs during this period and what lessons exist into the future.

A Bit of Background

Before becoming an academic I worked in the finance industry. Whilst bankers may not necessarily agree with how NGOs want to 'save the world' it is not infrequent to find that their social concerns often contradict their 'greed is good' image. Like others in the finance industry around me, I was worried about the emerging evidence of global warming even though many of its implications were yet to be a regular discussion point in the mainstream media. Sure, we all wanted to make money, but we still understood there was a world 'out there' – and there were some emerging trends that we should all be worried about. Within the finance sector, my political views were nothing extraordinary and reflected a liberal education: not only economically, but also socially. From my perspective, the role of governments is to ensure the right environment for markets to operate efficiently but slowly retreat from most kinds of service provision. I also believed that governments had a social obligation to ensure that certain essential services were available to all: including health, education and water.

By 1997, neo-liberalism had already cemented itself in the economy and was slowly spreading into other aspects of life. At this time, with my career firmly established, I left the finance industry to travel and due to events well outside the scope of this paper, my perspectives changed. I realised that while the free market might deliver prosperity to the already wealthy, the lives of the poor and vulnerable become increasingly precarious to the vagaries of a market that was superseding the role of government.

Leaving the finance sector, I started working with various non-government organisations, eventually accepting the role of Campaign Director at Aid/Watch (1998-2001), an "independent membership based watchdog on aid, trade and debt,

working with communities in the Global South”.² While based in Australia, it works with partner NGOs and communities internationally, and sees itself as part of a global movement based on solidarity for social and environmental justice. Aid/Watch receives no government or corporate funding and relies on ‘no strings attached’ money from members, donors and foundations.

My dramatic change in career was received by my former colleagues within the finance industry with mix of humour, derision and surprisingly, encouragement. It was, however, the reaction by a senior executive who I had worked with that gave me the important insight into why NGOs are necessary for a truly democratic society. He told me that while he dislikes organisations such as Greenpeace and Aid/Watch, they play a truly important part in our civil society. It is these organisations that, he said, monitor the actions of governments and corporations, making public their misdeeds. Paraphrasing his words, “you may not agree with much of what they say or do, but can you imagine who or how we’d keep the bastards in check without them?”

In the twelve years since my departure from the finance industry, we have seen neo-liberalism continue to spread with little consideration of alternatives. Democratically elected governments have yielded power and decision-making to the markets, which was supposedly less corrupt than public officials, more equitable and able to operate with greater efficiency. Once a cause for salutation, we are now witness to a global financial crisis that reveals the ‘human elements’ of the market. The crisis is revealing how neo-liberal ideology moved beyond the economic sector into areas that were once dominated by institutional commons such as childcare, health and education – shaping how we value what have long been considered essentials for a vibrant democracy.

Before proceeding, however, I would like to make a brief methodological note as this paper extends work I have previously undertaken with NGOs including the Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network (AFTINet) and ECA-Watch (see Arvanitakis 2007). I describe my research approach as action-based and participatory. That is, it is one where I take part and help shape events that I also observe. I am inspired and guided by theorists such as Doreen Massey (2008) who describe themselves as ‘academic activists’. Likewise, I draw on a long history of ‘feminist research methodologies’, including Mies (1991) and Bergmen (1993) who argue that the role of the researcher is to shape events and confront injustice, not to just sit idly by and observe. Such an approach has a long tradition in researching social movement, with Alberto Melucci (1996) calling for engaged narratives and carefully self-reflexive action research: here the very practice of research can contribute to struggles for justice. Action research, then seeks to connect scholarship with solidarity struggles (Mitchell 2004).

A challenge when writing about events in which you participate is the potential for a certain inaccuracy that stems from particular bias. I have attempted to reveal whatever bias I have by basing my analysis within a robust theoretical analysis. The ultimate decision as to the legitimacy of my argument then, will need to be made by the reader

² In this paper I continually refer to Aid/Watch’s strategic positions and philosophy. All information is available at www.aidwatch.org.au.

– much like civil society must decide their own perspectives on what is just within their democracy. Ultimately, my hope is that the following paper inspires participation in issues of social justice, and also assists activists and academics in formulating new strategies when confronted with hostile government forces.

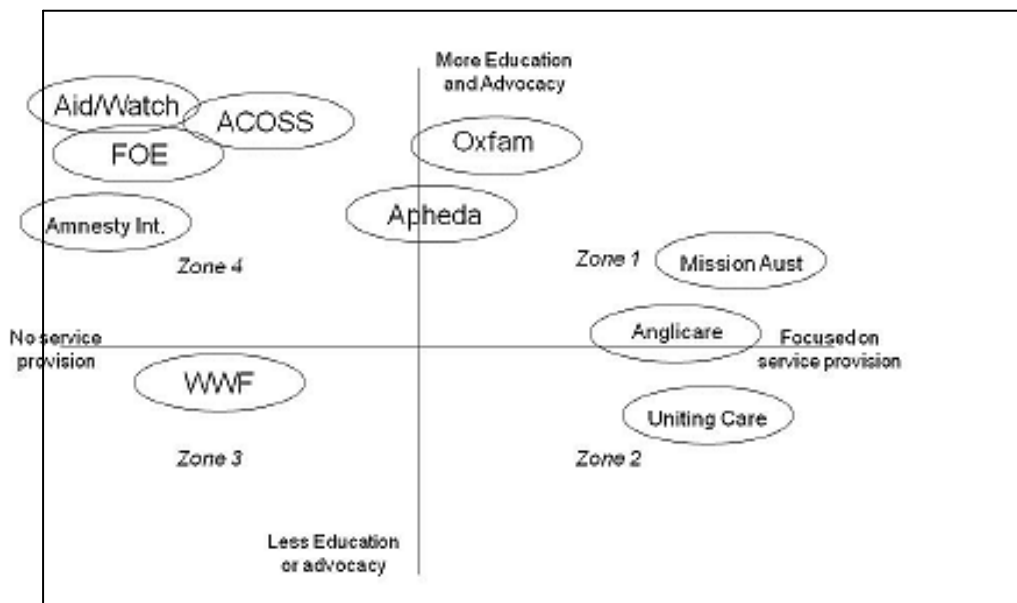
According to Touraine (1988), scholars occupy an important position in society as they enjoy unique opportunities to take part in and alter social struggles and society. When studying social movements, scholars should:

...enter into a relationship with the social movement itself. We cannot remain contented merely with studying actions or thoughts; we must come face-to-face with the social movement (1981, 142)

While a great deal of this paper draws from my work with Aid/Watch, I will also highlight how these challenges and responses apply to progressive NGOs more generally.

Not all NGOs are the same

Before discussing these issues, I would like to provide some background on Aid/Watch and their position in Australia’s civil society sector. What I am interested in is describing the different relationships that various NGOs have with the Federal Government. For the purposes of this paper, I want to look at NGOs through the following typology. Along the x-axis we see those NGOs that considered service providers. These NGOs provide services to specific sections of the community either on behalf of governments or because they have identified a marginalised community that is under-served. The y-axis illustrates NGOs that focus on programs for education and monitoring. These NGOs have more of an advocacy role in society as they focus on educating the public on specific issues that are generally to do with concerns raised from their monitoring of government, inter-government agencies or corporations (see Figure 1 below).



As can be seen, very few NGOs (if any) sit on either extreme. Rather, the typology highlights that most NGOs sit in the middle, illustrating that they perform a broad

continuum of functions. Like any typology, there are a number of important limitations, such as the fact that only two dimensions are represented. Moreover, the above typology captures and represents only a single point in time, while the very nature of NGOs means that they are constantly adapting their positions according to necessity. For this paper, however, the typology enables us to see how certain positions made specific organisations more vulnerable to specific strategies employed by the Howard government.

For example, during the Howard years we saw how NGOs focused on service provision became ever more reliant on government funding for their survival. According to Stapples (2008), this is because they were increasingly forced to take on the role of social service delivery – a consequence of Australian governments moving away from direct involvement in service provision. Many NGOs, then, have come to rely on the majority of their financial support from governments rather than dedicating energies to growing their volunteer or member bases, or campaigning for civil society donations. Such NGOs sit in Zones 1 and 2 of the typology and are less likely to be critical of government policy if they feel that their funding may be threatened: a point I discuss in more detail below.

On the other hand, Aid/Watch, which is a small organisation with a membership base which hovers around 500, sits in Zone 4. One of Aid/Watch's core goals is the promotion of 'environmentally sustainable principles' as well as researching the environmental impacts of debt. Like organisations such as Amnesty International – whose aims include the promotion of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights through education – the work of Aid/Watch also ends up taking the form of advocacy: an important point to which I will also return to.

Aid/Watch is a strident critic of the way government aid is delivered. The criticism is one that aid delivery is increasingly commercialised and delivered primarily to promote Australia's national interest, often at the expense of programs that would effectively combat poverty or encourage environmental sustainability. As such, Aid/Watch attempts to educate on the complex nature of aid, pointing out that when delivered under poorly designed policies it can actually undermine the ability of communities to determine their own futures, or establishing the basis for alternative development more culturally appropriate for attaining social and environmental justice. Internationally, Aid/Watch has been involved in campaigning to dramatically reform export credit agencies and to raise civil society awareness about the negative impacts that large-scale infrastructure developments, such as dams, can have on the cultural sustainability of local communities. Specific examples include campaigns undertaken with local (Indian) communities against the Narmada dam in India. In Australia, Aid/Watch has been part of the counter-globalisation movement and has helped organise protests against the World Bank and APEC, as well as being part of the organising committee for the 2000 'S11' protests against the World Economic Forum in Melbourne.

Much like Friends of the Earth (FOE), Aid/Watch classify themselves as 'independent' because they do not accept funding from governments or corporations. This independence does not mean they are not political. They labour across party lines and, depending on the specific issue, have worked publicly with the Australian Labor Party, the Greens, Independents, the former Australian Democrats, and have briefed

progressive members of the Liberal Party. Their independence, however, also allows them to be openly critical of both major parties when necessary.

Aid/Watch often made headlines criticising the Howard government and its position of using aid money to promote Australian commercial interests, such as the AWB scandal that I discuss in more detail below. This resulted in the organisation becoming a prime target of the Howard federal government. Consequently, Aid/Watch provides an important case study for the study of the survival strategies employed by NGOs under neo-liberalism.

Attacking the legitimacy

The attack on NGOs undertaken by the Howard government took many forms. For the sake of brevity, it is not possible to list the various strategies employed against progressive NGOs, but I will concentrate on three of the most effective tactics. These overlapping tactics are important because they reflect the broader neo-liberal agenda of the Howard government: one that seriously challenged the ability of NGOs to fulfil their functions while also undermining their legitimacy in civil society. In this way, then, the attack on NGOs was one that ‘commodified’ societal hope as governmental policies attempted reduce the mediums through which civil society might express their beliefs that a more just world should be a key objective of their democracy.

The first two of these strategies can be classified as material attacks on NGOs and have been well documented by the ‘silencing dissent’ thesis presented by Clive Hamilton and Sarah Maddison – originally published as a report for the Australia Institute (2004) and then re-written as a book (2007). Hamilton and Maddison argue that the Howard Government spent a great deal of energy employing tactics that aimed to silence “its critics in civil society” including “denigration and public criticism ... bullying ... management of consultation processes ... [and] diversionary tactics” (Maddison et al 2004, p. xii).

These tactics were acknowledged by NGOs in various forums. In 2003, Rose Melville and Roberta Perkins (2003) surveyed 142 peak NGO bodies, of which 100 were predominantly funded by different tiers of government. Melville found that:

...the fragility of this situation was made clear by government threats to this funding. More than half of these government-funded peaks claimed to have received such threats and 10 were actually totally de-funded. Nearly 40 percent of the reasons given for these threats or funding loss were due to the peaks’ political activity and changes in funding guidelines (2003, p. iv).

This de-funding had important “ramifications across the NGO sector” (Edgar 2008, 27), because many organisations became hesitant in taking a public position that would criticise the government. This hesitation was apparent in the interviews undertaken by Melville and Perkins. Their findings were reflected by a similar survey undertaken by Maddison et al (2004). In their survey, they approached almost 300 of the largest and best-known NGOs that work in the fields of social justice, welfare, environment, disability, women’s equity, family and youth. Maddison et al revealed that:

In Australia, recent years have seen an unprecedented attack upon NGOs, most particularly upon those organisations that disagree with the current federal government's views and values. The attacks have come both from government itself and from close allies such as the Institute of Public Affairs. Questions have been raised about NGOs' representativeness, their accountability, their financing, their charitable status and their standing as policy advocates in a liberal democracy such as Australia (2004: vii).

Hamilton and Maddison concluded that under the Howard government, not only did NGOs feel more or less constrained depending upon the level of government funding they received, but dissenting views were 'softened' for fear of repercussions; in this atmosphere, public debate was stifled. David Marr (2007) also reflected on this trend in his Quarterly Essay, noting that dissenting views amongst NGOs (as well as the ABC, public servants and civil society more broadly) had become strangely absent from Australia's public realm.

The second material strategy employed by the Howard government was a redefinition of the concept of 'charity'. In 2000, the Howard Government instigated the Charities Definition Inquiry. While the final report supported NGOs being able to engage in advocacy, a draft Charities Bill³ released following the Inquiry made it clear that NGOs involved in lobbying on any government policy would be adversely affected through their taxation status. That is, the bill attempted to change the Commonwealth taxation legislation for charities so that it would not apply to a wide range of nonprofit organisations including those involved in work related to education, social or community welfare, religion, culture, natural environment, civil and human rights, reconciliation and animal welfare. Such a legislation change would mean that these organisations could not claim concessions such as the 'tax deductibility status,' which allows them to fundraise.

The introduction of this Draft Bill was regarded as a direct attack on advocacy NGOs. This led to a backlash against the Draft Bill with Anglican Archbishop Peter Carnley describing the Bill as legislation one might expect from a quasi-totalitarian regime determined to control information and stifle public opinion (quoted in Barnes and Clarke 2003). The backlash meant that the Government initially stepped back from the Bill, but it did not abandon the idea. In 2005 two draft rulings from the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) emerged that restricted the ability of NGOs to receive tax deductibility if they engaged in public advocacy – affecting GST exemption and salary packaging. This meant that organisations like Aid/Watch, which have attempted to build an income base free of government funding, would be less able to fulfil their role as critical voices within civil society.

Aid/Watch was specifically caught in this strategy of the Howard Government as the ATO moved to revoke its charitable status. In an ATO Ruling, Aid/Watch lost its ability to act as a charity for "trying to procure changes in Australia's aid and development programs" and for being a 'political' organisation (quoted from Wade

³ See <http://www.apf.gov.au/library/Pubs/bd/2003-04/04bd164.htm> for background while analysis may be obtained from various sources including the Queensland University of Technology <http://www.bus.qut.edu.au/research/cpns/whatweresear/charitydefin.jsp>.

2007). The decision prompted Tim Costello, the chief executive of World Vision, to draw an important comparison: noting that if anti-slavery campaigner William Wilberforce had been bound to similar rules 200 years ago then Britain would not have abolished slavery (ibid.). He pointed out that these rules would have put Wilberforce in the position of either offering slaves food (and thus just prolonging slavery) or calling for an end to slavery but not helping those individuals currently suffering.

Because Aid/Watch is a small charitable organisation, with an annual income below AU\$100,000, the removal of charitable status threatened its very existence: a case that Aid/Watch won on appeal but which the ATO is challenging. At the time of writing, the case was yet to be brought before the High Court, but Aid/Watch was finding it hard to survive because the original decision of the ATO holds until it is overturned. For many NGOs, the ATO ruling established a worrying precedent whereby charities cannot engage in activities whose objectives are to alter laws, policies or Australian government decisions. We can see, then, that these actions taken against one specific NGO had a flow on effect that seriously threatens the advocacy role of all Australian NGOs.

The attitude of the Federal Government was highlighted by then Assistant Treasurer, Peter Dutton, who responded to Aid/Watch's inquiries about the ATO issue by saying that the fact Aid/Watch raised questions publicly about charitable status speaks for itself.⁴ He went on to explain this rather suggestive, yet very vague statement, by saying that Aid/Watch improperly publicised a matter that remains subject to appeal. Mr Dutton's implication is then, that if Aid/Watch were a 'genuine' charity it would keep silent. That is to say, charities should not be critical nor look to how structural inequalities might be improved, but just 'silently' fill the gaps that ineffective government policy or unfair market rules leave in society.

The third strategy involves the implementation of the political philosophy of 'public choice theory.' This strategy is concerning precisely because its implications go beyond the material. The theory denies the existence of altruism or long-term perspectives to explain social behaviour. Rather, public choice theory would have that the individuals of any given society are merely utility-driven economic players motivated by our short-term self-interest. It represents the idea that NGOs are merely another form of 'interest group' and as such are predatory creatures that merely compete with the rest of society for scarce economic resources. Moreover, this is aggravated by the fact that NGOs behave in a non-accountable way.

Academic-activist, Joan Stapples (2008), uses public choice theory to describe the discursive shift undertaken by the Howard Government, and how democracy is now represented within the neo-liberal paradigm. This narrows our understanding of representative democracy to one defined by economic choice over scarce resources: the government can either respond to the needs of broader society, or as John Howard stated in his 1996 Menzies lecture, be held to ransom by special interest groups.

⁴ See interview on ABC's AM program:
<http://www.abc.net.au/cgi-bin/common/printfriendly.pl?http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2007/s1937416.htm>

The way the Howard Government implemented this paradigmatic shift changed broader public perceptions of NGOs and civil society activity. No longer did NGOs exist to represent the marginalised or voiceless, or contest government decisions and provide alternative perspectives, they now had to justify their existence in terms of their constituency and activities. NGO activity that could be assigned an economic value, such as tree planting or meal delivery, was to be commended. On the other hand, commentary or analysis on public policy was to be understood as an unnecessary and unwanted interfering by 'radical' leftists who fundamentally disagreed with government promoting the market mechanism. As such, NGO activities were blamed on having 'disruptive effects' because they created 'excessive expectations' on the economy (Stapples 2008): that is, they pressured governments to allocate scarce resources towards special interests away from the broader community.

I found the power of this political discourse disconcerting. I saw a dramatic turn-around in the way that many members of the public came to reflect on organisations like Aid/Watch. No longer did my friends from finance understand that NGOs provided a counter-balance to establish power structures in our society, but instead asked, "who do you represent?" The intrinsic value of NGOs was replaced by an economic value that solely measured their activities through their 'output' or the numbers of their membership base. Consequently, mainstream groups that do not court controversy, such as the World Wildlife Fund, were seen to 'out represent' and thus have more legitimacy than smaller, more out-spoken organisations like Aid/Watch simply because their membership base was larger.

In other words, unless an organisation was seen to represent 'main-stream' opinions, it was seen to have a negative impact on the public and economic spheres of Australia. This dismissal of 'nonmainstream' opinion reached a peak with Howard government ministers attacking the legitimacy of both the reconciliation marches in 2000 and the anti-Iraq war protests in 2003. In 2000, it is estimated that millions marched over bridges for reconciliation: an impressive public showing of support for the movement that the Howard Government ignored. Consequently, Marr (2007) also points out that the reconciliation movement remained stagnant until recently revived by the Rudd apology. Likewise, huge crowds turned out against the invasion of Iraq – an estimated million people in Sydney alone. The then Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, dismissed such mass protests as nothing but 'a mob' (cited in Marr 2007). David Marr (2007: 37) also notes that after the World Economic Forum in Melbourne in 2000, the then Treasurer Peter Costello "raged in private against the demonstrators", while the NSW Premier, Bob Carr, described the demonstrators as "streetfighting" fascists.

Combining these various examples, I believe that a fundamental change was happening within Australian civil society: the commodification of hope. Based on the work of theorists such as Ghassan Hage (2003), I argue that 'hope' is at the core of a functioning and authentic community. What I am describing when I use the word hope is the productive process of working towards a better, more equitable and just world, not merely imagining it (Arvanitakis 2007). By dismissing the role of NGOs, the commodification processes of neo-liberalism – so adamantly encouraged by the Howard Government – replaced the vision of a better and more just world with one that is dominated by self-interest. In this way, hope is replaced by material aspirations (Arvanitakis 2007).

Before turning to the survival strategies by NGOs at this time, it is important to briefly outline other strategies that were employed by the Howard Government to silence dissent. Marian Sawer (2002) for example, notes that the Howard government undertook a series of ‘forced amalgamations’ that weakened the advocacy of groups that specifically did not fit the Government’s agenda. In addition, there was the emergence of purchaser-provider contracts that were established between the government and NGOs that required the delivery of specific outcomes directly related to government policy and objectives (Stapples 2008). As NGOs became more reliant on such funding for their survival, the less critical they would be of government. Associated with this according to Lyons (2003), was the emergence of strict confidentiality clauses in such contracts that required organisation not deal with the media without departmental or ministerial consent.

A response and survival strategies

Faced with this unrelenting attack, many NGOs employed new and innovative strategies such as moving into online activism, establishing new income streams and changing the way they operated. As Hamilton and Maddison (2007) highlighted in their research, some went to ground to remain small targets. While each of these strategies met with varying success, I believe that the key for NGOs like Aid/Watch, Oxfam and Greenpeace was to continue to pursue their goals without recoiling from the attacks. Their success should be measured because they continued to create ‘spaces of hope’. In other words, they persisted in confronting the neo-liberal agenda and in the process maintained their intrinsic value.

A long-term focus of Aid/Watch is changing Australia’s official aid program so that it does not ruinously promote Australia’s national interest ahead of strategies for poverty reduction and sustainability. Aid/Watch highlighted the corruptive tendencies of Australia’s foreign aid policy platform when the AWB scandal broke in 2005. Aid/Watch pointed out that it was this narrow view of ‘national interest’ that had justified spending aid dollars on unaccountable consultancy fees, such as those paid to the former Australian Wheat Board director, Trevor Flugge. In 2003, it was decided to award Mr Flugge an AusAID contract valued at AU\$700,000 to promote Australian wheat exports to Iraq to expand markets and, according to former Prime Minister John Howard, “to stop American wheat growers from getting our markets” (quoted in Doran 2007). This was prioritised ahead of using the funds to provide genuine advice or assistance on life threatening issues such as food security and agricultural reform.⁵

The case is an important one because it reveals not only the need to rethink how Australia should give aid but also the necessity for civil society ‘watchdogs’ – like my former colleague in finance pointed out – so that close government/corporate relationships do not become corrosively ‘chummy.’ Aid/Watch organised a number of protests at the AWB inquiry – known as the Cole Inquiry – that took place in 2005 in Sydney, including one that had staff and volunteers dressed as Alexander Downer and Trevor Flugge (including masks), freely handing out fake money and brandishing fake guns: a parity of the infamous photo of Trevor Flugge.⁶

⁵ Sourced from: <http://www.aidwatch.org.au/where-is-your-aid-money-going/australian-governmentaid/australian-aid-priorities>

⁶ The photo has become notorious and can be found at: http://www.smh.com.au/ffximage/2006/02/03/trevorflugge_wideweb__470x352,0.jpg

These ‘stunts’, which were complemented by an Aid/Watch report into the scandal received a great deal of media publicity.⁷ The purpose of these strategies was to raise public attention about the scandal but more importantly, Aid/Watch wanted to raise public consciousness about the broader issue bubbling beneath this explosive case: how should public money should be spent on aid programs? Because this was such a vulnerable issue for government, the then foreign Minister Alexander Downer over-reacted and attempted to discredit Aid/Watch by labelling it as an “extremist organisation”.⁸

Despite political attempts to silence Aid/Watch, in late 2007 they found that Australian aid money was once again being spent in a highly questionable fashion. Analysing the 2004-2005 AusAID budget, Aid/Watch discovered that the Australian Federal Police were funded to undertake training “for senior officials in the theory of counter terrorism recognition and collaboration for combating terrorism” (ibid.). This led to Aid/Watch revealing in late 2007 that Australian aid money was being used to train Burmese intelligence officers, including senior police, who were involved in the Burmese Government’s crackdown against pro-democracy demonstrators (Skehan 2007).

Aid/Watch began a public campaign highlighting that since 2004, the Australian Government had funded Burmese intelligence training through the *Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation*. Between 2004-08, the Centre received \$6 million and in November 2006, the Australian Federal Police trained 20 Burmese senior intelligence officers. While security is an important issue, and having a well-trained police force is essential for any democracy, training Burmese police intelligence directly serves the military regime because the state has no civil command. It was argued by Aid/Watch that such training paid for by Australian taxpayer, “directly implicates the Australian Government” in human rights abuses committed by the Burmese forces (Skehan 2007).

As with the AWB scandal, this issue was one that reached beyond the specifics of the case, and as such, it was a cause that formed a network of international solidarity. The Aid/Watch campaign linked up with other human rights groups such as the New York-based Human Rights Watch and the Brussels based International Crisis Group. While working independently, together they undertook an international campaign to draw attention to how police intelligence was being used against pro-democracy groups in Burma, especially since 2004.

Aid/Watch did not back away from these campaigns even when it was informed that its charitable taxation status was under review by the ATO and the organisation’s ability to raise funds were threatened. The ATO argued that Aid/Watch behaviour was uncharitable because it attempted to influence government aid programs.⁹ The ATO contended that by trying to influence aid programs, Aid/Watch was ‘extending’ its constitutional activities of monitoring aid to the deliverance of aid. One example that the ATO used to highlight Aid/Watch’s non-charitable activities was that it had

⁷ For example, the Aid/Watch report into the scandal led the news on the ABC’s PM program: <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2007/s1996393.htm>

⁸ Source from: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2007/08/03/1996377.htm>

⁹ Information sourced from correspondence between Aid/Watch and the ATO. (2007 to the present).

produced a 'postcard' aiming to continue to raise the plight of pro-democracy activist in Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi, amongst the Australian public. According to the ATO, this highlighted that Aid/Watch was an advocacy, not a charitable, organisation.

In response, Aid/Watch continued to campaign, maintaining the position that, for monitoring to be effective, it will always spill over into advocacy. The intrinsic importance of this argument for the role of NGOs in civil society meant that Aid/Watch became a rallying point for a diverse range of organisations: from the Australia Institute and the Environmental Defenders Office, to World Vision.

The organisational support received by Aid/Watch illustrates that the specific case bought against Aid/Watch was understood as a deeper neo-liberal affront against the intrinsic nature of NGOs. The fact that there was no back down was an important survival strategy, not only for Aid/Watch as an individual organisation, but also because it made visible the fundamental political attack against the ideals that NGOs seek to represent in societies.

Concluding thoughts: creating spaces of hope

International aid has long been a prickly subject and political realists deny that it can ever be altruistic. Rather, Aid/Watch argues that aid is a thin camouflage used by powerful states to influence or impose certain political ideologies on less powerful states. Within international politics, then, while not commendable, it is certainly not unjustifiable to use aid to support a regime from which your particular country is profiting. NGOs like Aid/Watch, however, represent a hope that as a global civil society we will want to act as responsible citizens because we are just as capable of feeling compassion for an unknown family in an unknown country as understanding the logic that a country whose population live in inhuman conditions is more susceptible to be converted to acts of terrorism.

The fact that the survival strategy of Aid/Watch succeeded confirms that NGOs have an intrinsic value within civil society. That is to say, despite the substantial political attacks against them, the organisation continued publicly campaigning based on a belief that civil society would support them because hope existed. Hope exists on two interrelated levels – the personal and societal. Hope can be realised through activities that represent a belief in a 'better' future such as collective struggles for justice, political activity or individual actions taken with a developed consciousness in regards to social responsibility. In other words, hope is productive: it is produced by action. In secular societies, hope is faith without the certainties and it promotes optimism, renewal and human resilience (Stephens 2003).

According to the most renowned academic on hope, Ghassan Hage (2003), functioning communities experience a "surplus of hope". In such communities, hope is openly shared and freely distributed. Hage's position is that key to a decent society is a capacity to distribute hope. That is to say, that by 'hoping' we realise that the unique quality of hope within a neo-liberal paradigm is that it cannot be commodified. The more of it we use and share, the more abundant it becomes. In contrast, commodities such as diamonds derive their value from their scarcity. Hope is radically different because its value lies in its abundance.

The message delivered here is clear: although the material activities that NGOs undertake are critically important when it comes to survival, we see that in some ways these are secondary factors. More important is their vocal vision that ‘a better world is possible.’ It was the refusal by organisations such as Aid/Watch and Oxfam to relent on their message of hope that was the most important strategy in confronting the onslaught of neo-liberalism.

Aid/Watch as an organisation remains under financial pressure. If it succumbs to this pressure and disappears, the loss to Australia’s political sphere will be much greater than can be measured by ‘public choice’ theorists.

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