

Tuesday, 9 September 2003
Western Australian Parliament (Legislative Assembly)
John Hyde MLA, Member for Perth
Loan Bill 2003, Second Reading

MR J.N. HYDE (Perth) [9.37 pm]: As a member of the Australian Reproductive Health Alliance through the All Party Parliamentary Group on Population and Development, I recently had the opportunity to examine how Australian aid is being used in the Philippines and how important population issues are being addressed and funded there. As someone who believes that politics is the most efficient and compassionate way for society to advance its needs and to meet its wants, I gained much policy insight into how the Philippines is operating and the impact of assistance from the First World. I wish to thank the David and Lucille Packard Foundation in the United States, which enabled this study to occur. I also want to link these comments with Australia's national policy on security and protecting its borders. At a time when our foreign aid is being openly diverted to the political agenda of ensuring our security by bolstering foreign police and armed forces, we are destabilising our security by not targeting our aid towards poverty alleviation and health improvement directly. Unfortunately, my Australian and Pacific parliamentary colleagues and I were slightly diverted from these lofty policy issues by a coup in the Philippines. As was reported by Rina Jimenez-David on the Filipino inQ7.net web site on 30 July 2003 -

IN THE 10 days that they were in the country, they experienced a typhoon, a landslide and an armed mutiny. While their Prime Minister was here on an official visit, a convicted international terrorist, implicated in the tragic Bali bombing that killed more than 100 Australians, strolled out of his jail cell and remains at large. To top it off, Australian Ambassador Ruth Pearce was trapped inside the Oakwood serviced-apartments building in Makati City during the mutiny last Sunday of the Magdalo group of junior military officers.

Despite this series of catastrophic events, however, a group of visiting Australian parliamentarians, together with parliamentarians from Tonga, Kiribati and Papua New Guinea, say they are convinced that the Philippines remains a "safe" place, and that they will assure their constituents and colleagues of this fact when they return to Australia.

Why is it important that Australian parliamentarians visit places like the Philippines? Why do my constituents in central Perth care about an Asian neighbour? The International Federation of Journalists, which represents 500 000 journalists worldwide and of which I am a member, stated on 2 September that the Philippines' record of assassinated journalists now rivals that of the notoriously dangerous Colombia. It said that the death toll of journalists in the Philippines for this year was five, just one less than that of Colombia. With

another death last week, it is now at six. It stated that some of those involved in government and security do not want the truth to come out. We must ensure that Australia's financial aid and foreign policies are based on accurate information. Why does this concern a state politician like me and my constituents? Our constituents were targeted in Bali because they were Australian. Our everyday lives are being impacted upon, rightly or wrongly, because of the perception that even in Western Australia there is a greater security risk. This very Parliament is spending an extra \$1 million for what is perceived to be our security. We take our shoes off at WA airport scanners now. We are told that car bays outside Perth's hotels are potential bombsites. Are we being deluded and sucked into accepting that the only way to protect ourselves is to build bigger, higher and stronger fences to keep out threats? After spending time in the Philippines, we could not escape the fact that it will be only through feeding, housing and delivering health to dispossessed people in Asia - Muslim or otherwise - that we can remove the terrorist's greatest asset; that is, the view that terrorism is the only way to escape poverty.

I was in Manila when the visiting Australian Prime Minister's response to the Philippine police and military in allowing terrorist Fathur Rohman al-Ghozi to walk out of jail was to divert \$5 million of Australian aid to those very same police and military in the guise of improving security. Impoverished people are harbouring terrorists because they feel more threatened by their own corrupt police and military. The unanimous message of our all-party group, with members from the Liberal, the Labor and the Australian Democrats parties, was that Australian aid must be more appropriately targeted to non-government organisations and local government units that have been successful in addressing the challenges of population, development, reproductive health and the environment. According to the 2002-03 Australia's overseas aid program, Australia was sending \$63 million in aid to the Philippines, focusing on the quality of management of basic education and responsiveness of rural service delivery in southern provinces, including the very troubled Mindanao.

The 2001 edition of the Australian Government's official record, Year Book Australia, states -

In 1996 the Simons Review was commissioned by the Minister of Foreign Affairs. This led to the adoption of a single clear objective for the aid program: to advance Australia's national interest by assisting developing countries to reduce poverty and achieve sustainable development. The Government decided that Papua New Guinea, the Pacific and East Asia would continue to be high priorities for Australian assistance. It was also decided that health, education, rural development and governance would be the priority sectors, in addition to two issues that cut across the development process: the promotion of gender equity and the maximisation of environmental sustainability.

This is laudable and sensible, despite the compassionless objective to advance Australia's national interest.

While in the Philippines we became more and more convinced that more of the aid money must go directly to NGOs and communities where it can make a big difference to people's lives. In addition to taking a closer look at where Australian aid money goes, in a statement we have urged that the Australian Government consider bridging the gap created by the United States' decision to withdraw funding for the distribution of contraceptives in the Philippines. As a group we were pleased to see how the Philippines, particularly at a local level, is addressing the serious challenges in population growth and development issues. It is important that we support, cooperate and collaborate at all levels to make further advances. We also supported very strongly the right of Filipino women to be better educated on issues of reproductive health and for them to be fully involved in decisions on these issues. We encouraged the Philippine Government - we were fortunate to meet a number of very senior senators and congress people of the Philippine Parliament - to continue to promote and support reproductive health and population issues through appropriate legislative measures.

On the Filipino web site to which I previously referred, Ms David also stated -

This seems a remote possibility, though, since President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, in her State of the Nation Address on Monday, seems to have slammed the door, quite forcefully, on legislation that seeks to protect and promote the reproductive health and rights of our citizens. In fact, she even virtually called Senator Rodolfo Biazon and the members of Congress behind the Reproductive Health Care Act of being "sneaks," practically accusing them of "smuggling" abortion by way of legislation!

It seems the visiting lawmakers from Australia and the Pacific . . . have gained more understanding of and insight into the reproductive health situation in this country than our President, who even dares to proudly call herself a woman and an economist.

The Philippines remains beset with population challenges. It has a falling fertility level and an overconcentration of people in the five biggest cities. Environmental degradation is also rife. After visiting some of the poorer provinces in the south and being inspired by a number of local NGOs and, more importantly, the local mayors and councils that were making a real difference, we came to the understanding that restoring communities and empowering people costs a lot less than letting a country fall apart. It also costs a lot less than having to build up support - military and police - that are, on many occasions, verging on the corrupt.

Back in the 1970s the richest countries in the world, Australia included, committed themselves to giving 0.7 per cent of their national wealth to overseas aid. In 2002-03 the percentage of Australia's gross domestic product spent on overseas aid fell to just 0.25 per cent. Previous Labor Governments are just as guilty in not living up to that 1970 commitment. Only five countries live up to it. The United States gives a miserly 0.1 per cent. Canada also gives the same as Australia, just 0.25 per cent of GDP, yet Canadians are not the terrorist targets in Asia that Australians are. It is interesting to note that in the Philippines the Canadian money in its entirety goes directly to NGOs, local government and projects. The money does not filter through the administration, the police or the military. The money gets to programs and acts to restore mangroves, encourage reforestation and empower many local Filipino women to take control of their communities. It allows for the provision of family planning advice and for work to be done on eradicating poverty and addressing other important health issues. Australia needs to consider its overseas aid policy. We have very lofty aims. We should have a lot of compassion when supplying foreign aid. Even if our priority is to put the interests of Australia first, the interests of Australia are better served by less poverty, better health and a happier population in an Asia that does not have to turn to terrorism.