

As Australia counts down to next election, faith-based NGOs ramp up advocacy

devex.com/news/as-australia-counts-down-to-next-election-faith-based-ngos-ramp-up-advocacy-93988

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January 3, 2019



Micah Australia Executive Director Tim Costello with advocates at its annual Voices for Justice gathering in Canberra. Photo by: [Micah Australia](#)

CANBERRA — At the Parliament of Australia’s final sitting of the year last week, the government ran down the clock with a much-criticized [filibuster](#) — seeking to block a bill mandating the temporary transfer of asylum seekers housed on Manus Island or Nauru to Australia who require medical assistance.

“There is only one way to increase aid — and that is by it being bipartisan, to remove it as a political wedge.”

— Tim Costello, executive director of Micah Australia

The vote was expected to pass easily and would have resulted in the [Migration Act 1958](#) being amended to require the temporary transfer of those assessed by two or more treating doctors as requiring medical assistance — along with their families. The amendment additionally requires the temporary transfer of the remaining 10 children on Nauru, along with their families, from offshore detention to Australia for medical or psychiatric assessment. The bill could effectively move hundreds of asylum seekers from the controversial offshore centers into Australia.

The filibuster showed a government on the edge as Australia heads into its next election, to be held by May 18. But it also shows the importance that humanitarian and development issues will play on the electorate’s decision and the opportunity for NGOs to play an important role in shaping decisions.

As the final sitting **More on Australian aid**:

week began, faith-

based NGOs and

church groups

made their push

for lawmakers to put forward a stronger aid program and humanitarian action.

► [Australian aid: The financial impact of a new government revealed](#)

► [Australian aid: A conversation with Anne Ruston](#)

All eyes on an election

Dr. Kerry Phelp, an Independent member of parliament elected in October following the ousting of former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, introduced the [Migration Amendment \(Urgent Medical Treatment\) Bill 2018](#). With the election of Phelps and the [recent defection of Liberal member of Parliament Julia Banks](#), Independents, the Greens, and other small party MPs now have a controlling stake in the passing of legislation. The bill looked set to pass both houses.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the [legislation would undermine border protection laws](#) and sought to do whatever it took to ensure it would not pass — achieved by filibustering. But the legislation will still be on the cards when Parliament returns in February, with the Morrison government [expected to fast-track the removal of children from Nauru before the vote resumes](#) to prevent its necessity. If this is the case, political observers suggest the circus to block the legislation to be less about border security and more about saving face.

There is growing voter backlash in Australia over the treatment of asylum seekers, as well as against increasing demonization of refugee and immigrant populations. These issues helped Phelps get elected, as well as a slate of state-level Labor lawmakers. And it has set the course for a likely Labor win in the upcoming national elections.

Opportunity to promote development and humanitarian issues

While local issues are expected to take center stage in the federal elections, Australia's ability to engage on the international stage will be an important consideration for voters entering the polling booth. Recent [protests by Australian students on lack of climate action](#) — supported by their voting parents and teachers — show global humanitarian, development, and environmental challenges are issues voters want real policies and action on.

The role of NGOs in this politically charged environment is to keep the conversation moving forward.

The [Voices for Justice](#) campaign, led by [Micah Australia](#), a coalition of churches and Christian organizations, is part of this grassroots action. From Dec. 1, 200 Micah supporters came to Canberra for the final parliamentary sitting week. For two days, they participated in policy briefing and training sessions to highlight the importance of engaging with politicians and how best to speak to NGOs. And for two days, lobby groups conducted 80 meetings with politicians, calling on all major parties to step up

Australia's role in official development assistance.

The group advocated for Australia to return to the top half of rich country aid donors by the end of the next parliamentary term. Australian aid currently sits at 0.23 percent of gross national income, with the call for the aid program to increase to 0.33 percent of GNI in the next six years — requiring a minimum increase to the aid program of 10 percentage points per year.

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"It's been a great reception," said Tim Costello, executive director of Micah Australia. "They knew the lines in advance politicians would give and were well rehearsed: that we have to increase public opinion, charity begins at home, that what we give away overseas stays overseas. These are ordinary people from local electorates who are passionate about the world's poor. They are not installed with the clever arguments of politicians but are sincere in their calls for action."

Australian aid's new focus: Infrastructure finance, security, and sports

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison last week announced an adjustment of aid to the Pacific to include an Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific. Devex asks experts for their thoughts.

The discussions also brought up the recently announced Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific. The group is advocating for the new facility not to come at the cost of the existing grants-based aid program that supports immunizations, basic health services, and water, sanitation, and hygiene programs.

"Aid is both hardware and software, but software is the most important component," Costello said. "While the government thinks they might be able to build a bridge — the hardware — to win an election, to achieve sustainable development you actually have to have the software. You need the buy-in of the community, the understanding of the impediments and barriers to poverty. And we fear that the balance has not been struck right with the infrastructure fund."

Costello said the recent focus on security within the aid program under new foreign minister Marise Payne was creating opportunities to open discussion with the government.

"There was no movement from this government on aid until defense and security agencies said aid had been cut too much," he said. "And when they said it, the government started listening. They actually had a better view on the software side of aid. And this has been an opportunity to reopen the discussion."

But as Costello was among those who expected the government to change in 2019, the meetings crossed parties to encourage bipartisan support of aid — not just to influence the incoming government — to ensure it was never again threatened.

"There is only one way to increase aid — and that is by it being bipartisan, to remove it as a political wedge," he said. "There are never votes in aid — we've always known that."

The recipients don't vote. But leaders have to lead. We need an International Development Act like the United Kingdom that reports to parliamentarians. Here there is largely ignorance on aid and developments from politicians because it is an off-budget revenue item — and you don't get reports back to parliament. That needs to change.”

There were specific asks from the two days of action — an increase of disability funding by an extra 1 million Australian dollars (\$700,000) a year and an additional AU\$100 million for the U.N. Refugees Agency and regional resettlement. And politicians were also congratulated on the passing of Australia's first Modern Slavery Act in November — legislation faith-based groups advocated for.

A major objective from the two days of discussions was also to gather information on what politicians said, to feed this into an advocacy tracker to shape the actions of Micah as part of the election campaign.

“It will be an influence strategy to encourage people to speak up, write up to their politicians, and ask questions at candidate forums,” Costello said, with specific targets for each politician.

And with all sides of politics ramping up their campaigns, the tracker will become an important source for aid and development advocacy sooner rather than later.

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Lisa Cornish is a Devex Reporter based in Canberra, where she focuses on the Australian aid community. Lisa formerly worked with News Corp Australia as a data journalist for the national network and was published throughout Australia in major metropolitan and regional newspapers, including the Daily Telegraph in Melbourne, Herald Sun in Melbourne, Courier-Mail in Brisbane, and online through news.com.au. Lisa additionally consults with Australian government providing data analytics, reporting and visualization services. Lisa was awarded the 2014 Journalist of the Year by the New South Wales Institute of Surveyors.