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OttawaWatch 173: John McKay's Better Aid bill

By Lloyd Mackey

*John McKay's religious affiliation has altered slightly since this piece was written. His wife, Carolyn Dartnell, a television producer for **Vision**, held a similar post for some years for Living Truth, the television sector for The Peoples Church, just around the corner from Spring Garden Church. Peoples is the famous mission-oriented megachurch founded by Oswald J. Smith. Out of deference to his spouse's workplace, John and Carolyn became adherents there.*

Apart from that, it is noteworthy that, on this particular issue, social development that is truly poverty alleviating finds support across the political spectrum, when framed with adequate nuances. McKay and Hugh Segal were able to achieve that balance.

Today, of course, the issue of colonialization would be a complicating factor in this discussion.

John McKay represents the latest example of a relatively infrequent event. He is an opposition MP whose private member's bill has passed in both the House of Commons and the Senate, and is now awaiting momentary royal assent.

McKay's Better Aid Bill (C-293) has a simple objective. It aims to ensure that "all Canadian official development assistance abroad is provided with a central focus on poverty reduction."

McKay, a Liberal MP from Scarborough-Guildwood, a Toronto suburban riding, also happens to be a past moderator of Spring Garden Baptist Church and a co-founder of the Canadian section of the Christian Legal Fellowship.

And in his pre-political days, he was involved in a small micro-credit organization, along with a number of other evangelical Christian friends. That organization, known as CIDO was involved in the early days of what has become a significant factor in Christian relief and development work – community banking for entrepreneurs in less developed regions. Their clear objective was to alleviate poverty.

"There always seemed to be a lot of grant money around, but not much of it clearly directed toward alleviating poverty," McKay recalls.

Many hurdles face a private member with a bill to advance. Winning the "lottery", through which the bills are chosen, is the first step. Then getting all sides on side, stickhandling amendments, avoiding the pitfall of actually proposing government expenditure ... and the process goes on.

Summarizing the bill briefly, McKay notes that it is aimed at “creating a legislated mandate for Canadian Official Development Assistance (ODA) requiring foreign aid to focus on poverty reduction and the promotion of human rights.

“It also requires Canadian aid flow to respect the priorities of its beneficiaries – the people living in poverty around the world. Finally, it requires better – and more timely – reporting on results.”

McKay was first elected in 1997. He was parliamentary secretary to Liberal then-finance minister Ralph Goodale.

He does not deny the assumption that he is one of the more socially and fiscally conservative of the Liberals, and carries that reputation with considerable sophistication.

So it was no surprise that, as a Liberal, he was able to get this poverty-alleviation bill passed in parliament, with Conservative concurrence.

Mind, it did not hurt that Conservative Senator Hugh Segal picked up on his cause, when the bill went to the Senate. Between the two of them, McKay and Segal are the probably the ideal people to manage a collaborative approach to reducing global poverty.

Segal comes from the progressive side of conservatism. He traces his interests in both conservatism and community to the influences that shaped his religious education. The 50s and 60s Canadian prime minister, John Diefenbaker, a straight-laced Baptist, won Segal’s admiration when he visited his class at a Montreal Jewish school.

Segal was appointed to the upper house by the Liberals. But he ended up playing a key role in reeling most of conservatism’s progressive wing into the present Conservative party, cobbled together by Stephen Harper and company.

Segal stick handled the process of getting several amendments through the Senate with both Conservative and Liberal endorsement, before it was returned to the house for final approval prior to royal assent.

During the two year process, the Conservatives seemed often to be running interference to the bill, both in the house and its various committees.

Once Segal got involved, however, the required endorsement of the bill by cabinet, by way of recommendation from International Co-operation Minister Bev Oda, was handily secured.

Conservative Ted Menzies who, like McKay before him, is parliamentary secretary to the finance minister (in this case, Jim Flaherty), spoke his endorsement in the house with the declaration that “for Canadian taxpayers to understand and support Canada’s effective role in international development assistance, they need to be reassured that we are committed to using tools such as independent evaluations and objective assessments.”

On a more personal note, he conceded: “I’m certainly happy for the mover of the bill (McKay). It is good to see, it’s a nice feeling to have something passed unanimously.”

Although the unanimity was there, some NDPers in the house would like to have seen a little more. Private member bill that it was, McKay’s initiative would have been dead in the water if it had actually proposed any expenditure or alteration in the budget.

Nevertheless, NDP international co-operation critic Alexa McDonough maintained that there should not just be better aid, but more of it. She noted that although Canada was a leader in pushing donor countries to adopt 0.7 per cent of a nation’s GNP as the target for official development assistance, we are currently only putting in 0.31 per cent.

Poverty alleviation, like parliamentary collaboration, often comes in tiny, incremental steps.

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