

HIGH TIME FOR A MINISTER WHO UNDERSTANDS THE ROLE OF AID

At Oda's CIDA, slow has taken on new meaning and poverty has taken a back seat to trade

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Figure 1 REUTERS

When Bev Oda was moved from the Heritage portfolio and became minister for the Canadian International Development Agency, some saw it as a demotion. Now it's time for another demotion – time to send Ms. Oda back to school for some lessons in diplomacy, management and compassion.

Things have not been good at CIDA for years. Constant changes of ministers, presidents and priorities have left the once-respected agency dazed and confused. It now takes CIDA an average of 43 months – almost four years – to move a project from concept to approval. Even the Auditor-General says the organization is overregulated.

Then came Ms. Oda. Since her arrival, “slow” has taken on new meaning. Projects sent for her signature are regularly returned for revision, some a dozen times or more. Proud non-governmental organizations that carry the Maple Leaf and solid development work into the farthest corners of the world have had long-standing CIDA grants held up for months. Many have used up their reserves awaiting the minister's signature, and some have come close to bankruptcy.

In Toronto in May, the minister spoke about how CIDA was deprioritizing Canadian aid to several of the poorest African countries, along with Cambodia and Sri Lanka. This was supposedly all about geographic “focus,” but it conveniently loosened up money for new programs in two upper-middle-income countries, Peru and Colombia, where, coincidentally, the government wants to improve trade. Then the minister announced new “themes” for CIDA: food security, children and youth, and economic development. There is nothing wrong with these themes, but as the Auditor-General pointed out, CIDA's priorities have changed five times in the past seven years.

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The minister never tires of words like “results” and “effectiveness.” In the Toronto speech, she used the word “impact” five times, “results” seven times, “accountability” nine times and “effective” 15 times. It’s as though nobody was concerned about effectiveness until she arrived and started changing priorities, closing down established country programs and opening new ones. This is not the path to effective development – it’s a guarantee of the opposite.

Then, in November, CIDA cut funding to Kairos, a well-respected Canadian organization working for social change in developing countries through advocacy, education and research. Never mind that Kairos has the backing of 11 Canadian church bodies, including Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians and Catholics. Never mind that it had just received a glowing CIDA evaluation. Kairos didn’t “fit” CIDA’s new priorities. Or at least that’s what Ms. Oda told Parliament. But that’s not what Immigration Minister Jason Kenney said in a speech in Israel on Dec. 16. He said the government has a “zero-tolerance policy to anti-Semitism” and organizations “like Kairos, who are taking a leadership role in the boycott.”

Was he confusing the Canadian organization with a Kairos in Palestine, which calls for a boycott of Israeli goods? The Canadian Kairos has an explicit stated policy against boycotting Israeli products. Who knows? Ms. Oda has been less than open in her explanation. But there is a bigger question here, apart from the dizzying mismanagement and the terminological inexactitude of cabinet ministers. Is the purpose of Canadian aid to follow slavishly every nostrum cooked up by the minister of the day? Is it to grease the skids of commercial trade deals? Or is it about helping the poorest to create better lives for themselves in the harshest of economic and environmental climates?

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If we knew how to end poverty, we would have done it a long time ago. That’s why it is important to learn, to remember and apply what we are learning. That’s why it is important to stay the course, geographically and thematically, so we can become good at what we do. That’s why it is important to encourage other voices, other views and other experiences.

It’s high time Canada had a minister who understands this, who understands that development delayed is development denied, and who understands that in an inherently risky business, the solution is not constant change and a demand for guarantees. It lies in an approach that learns from trial and error, one that can turn a mixed record into sustained success. It’s high time Ms. Oda was returned to the back benches, and for the government to appoint a minister who can deliver what taxpayers demand of CIDA: solid, consistent and timely development for the poorest.