

# Milder than Tony Abbott? Trump on foreign aid

By Robin Davies  
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*bull following the US election results as Donald Trump took the clear lead. Photo: ABC/Ross Nerdal*

You might not expect Donald Trump to have thought or said much about foreign assistance. In fact, he has made more than a few remarks on the subject. These have been well summarised by various US-based publications. See, particularly, [this](#) piece by Tom Murphy on Humansphere and [this](#) by Malaka Gharib on NPR.

It has often been noted that Trump has much in [common](#), and even some [connections](#), with the now-deceased Jesse Helms. Helms was the arch-conservative Republican senator from North Carolina who in 1994 memorably [said](#) that much US aid was ‘going down foreign rat holes’. Later, in 2001, he [called](#) for USAID to be shut down and aid distributed through ‘private and faith-based organisations’.

But Trump, it seems, has more complicated views. On the one hand, he is on record as favouring an overall [decrease](#) in foreign assistance and often talks about redirecting ineffective foreign aid to domestic infrastructure programs in inner cities. As has been widely reported, he doesn’t want to see aid going to ‘countries that hate us’.

On the other hand, as Murphy’s piece shows, he likes [PEPFAR](#), the HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment program established by George W. Bush, and intends to continue it. As Gharib’s piece shows, he appears to be quite strongly in favour of aid for water and sanitation. And he has spoken broadly in favour of humanitarian aid—while questioning the effectiveness of infrastructure assistance to conflict-affected countries such as Iraq and

Afghanistan.

Beyond the general and somewhat vague remarks above, Trump has made one concrete and significant policy commitment on one line of aid spending, or rather its abolition. In his [100-day plan](#) he lists seven actions ‘to protect American workers’, of which the seventh is to ‘cancel billions in payments to UN climate change programs and use the money to fix America’s water and environmental infrastructure’. He is referring, presumably, to President Obama’s \$3 billion [commitment](#) to the UN Green Climate Fund (GCF), on which that organisation is rather [counting](#). The US commitment to the GCF accounts, at present, for almost one-third of all commitments.

Overall, it’s fair to say that Trump’s pre-election statements about US aid are roughly on par with Tony Abbott’s pre-election statements about Australian aid in 2013. If Trump wants to remain on par with Abbott’s ghost after his inauguration then he will need to [abolish](#) USAID and [slash](#) the US aid budget by more than 20% (over US\$6 billion) while perhaps [backflipping awkwardly](#) on climate financing. But it’s quite possible that he’ll lurch less than this, and turn out to be more moderate on foreign aid than Australia’s former Prime Minister.

## About the author/s

### Robin Davies

Robin Davies is an Honorary Professor at the ANU’s Crawford School of Public Policy and an editor of the Devpolicy Blog. He headed the Indo-Pacific Centre for Health Security and later the Global Health Division at Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) from 2017 until early 2023 and worked in senior roles at AusAID until 2012, with postings in Paris and Jakarta. From 2013 to 2017, he was the Associate Director of the Development Policy Centre.

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