



Submission No 19

Review of Australia's Relationship with the Countries of Africa

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Organisation: Private Submission

Submission No:.....19.....
Date Received:14/12/09.....
Secretary:


Senator Michael Forshaw
Chairman
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2000

Dear Senator Forshaw,

Inquiry into Australia's Relations with Africa

I write in a personal capacity but with the following qualifications:

- childhood in Tanzania from 1960-1974
- Foreign Affairs Desk Officer, Africa Section, 1982-83
- Third Secretary, Australian High Commission, Nairobi 1983-85
- MPhil degree, Cambridge University, 1985-86 with thesis on the Commonwealth's Role in the Negotiation of Zimbabwe's Independence
- Australian High Commissioner to Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and the Gambia, Ambassador to Senegal 1997-2000
- Director, Political Affairs Division, Commonwealth Secretariat 2002-2008
- Head, Africa Task Force, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2009

I am still a senior officer of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, currently in the Pacific Division. However I would welcome the opportunity to appear before the Committee in a private capacity in its current inquiry, given my lifelong personal and professional engagement with Africa. During my time at the Commonwealth Secretariat I was closely engaged in the democratic development of Africa's English speaking countries, and would be happy to speak to that in detail.

For someone of my background it is exciting to see Australia taking its relations with Africa seriously again, after decades of neglect. We need to recognise this is a continent of 53 nations, one quarter of the world, where we have substantial commercial interests, especially in the mining industry, and extensive person to person links, including through the NGO sector. As important players in international forums, Africa nations can also help us achieve our global goals, and we will certainly fail to build global coalitions for these goals without engaging them.

We also need to recognise that Australians, if not the Australian Government, has a long history with Africa. Indeed I grew up in Africa because my parents were there as Australian Anglican missionaries in the central region of Tanzania. From the end of the First World War till well after independence it was Australian missionaries who provided the bulk of the health and education services in this vast region of East Africa.

Yet Australia has never sought to capitalise on this investment of decades of goodwill or support with official aid the very real assistance provided by Australians. One point I emphasised in my work with the Africa Task Force earlier this year was the need for the official engagement to catch up with the people to people links and commercial investment.

Too often the image of Africa in Australia is of a poverty stricken, conflict ridden continent. This fails to understand that as a continent of 53 nations, there are great differences between these nations and their levels of development and opportunity. It underlines the importance of having a policy sophisticated enough to engage Africa not just as a continent but on a nation by nation basis, something we supported the Foreign Minister Mr Smith in doing in the Africa Task Force.

This negative image also fails to take account of the fact that harnessing Africa's vast resources will be crucial to the world's future development and its ability to feed itself. China by contrast is very alert to this opportunity, and consequently heavily engaged in the continent.

I have already contributed to the Commonwealth Roundtable Submission to the Committee. But I would welcome the opportunity to speak personally with the Committee, should the time be available.

Yours sincerely

Matthew E.K. Neuhaus