what parliamentarians think about Australia's post-COVID-19 aid program: The emerging ‘cautious consensus’ in Australian aid

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Abstract
Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian Government has been ambiguous in the way it has communicated the aid budget. On some occasions, it has sought to downplay increases in aid spending, while at other times it has sought to downplay cuts to aid spending. We draw on interviews with federal parliamentarians and key informants to understand these dynamics, in the context of obtaining their views on changes to Australia's post-COVID-19 aid policy. We find evidence that a new political consensus is forming around Australian aid. While this ‘cautious consensus’ countenances aid spending increases, motivated in part by humanitarian concerns but especially by anxiety about increasing Chinese influence in the region, these priorities are tempered by considerable concern about public backlash at a time of significant economic challenges for Australian citizens. Based on this evidence, we define the contours of an emerging ‘cautious consensus’ by showing how it will differ from the earlier ‘golden consensus’ era of Australian aid.
INTRODUCTION

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian Government has been reluctant to clearly communicate its overall aid spending. The 2020–21 budget nominally increased Australia’s aid spending by 4%, the first budgeted increase in aid spending since 2013. And yet, despite offering a clear opportunity to highlight its increased assistance to the region in response to COVID-19, the government instead presented the budget in a way that suggested it was ‘trying to keep the increase in aid hidden’ (Howes, 2020). According to government budget documents, various COVID-19 relief spending packages—despite being eligible to be classified as aid, or Official Development Assistance (ODA)1—were to be considered ‘supplementary funding’ that are ‘separate from’ the aid program (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [DFAT], 2020b, p. 1).

This unusual approach to presenting the aid budget was maintained in the subsequent 2021–22 budget.2 Clare’s (2021) analysis explains how the estimated $4.335 billion aid spend for 2021–22—a cut of 4.9% in real terms from the 2020–21 aid budget—was again presented in two parts, despite both being eligible to qualify as ODA: a core budget of $4 billion and temporary COVID-19 support of $335 million. This time, however, rather than deploying this bifurcated budget mechanism to downplay budgeted increases in total aid spending, the government downplayed budgeted decreases in total aid spending.

In communicating the 2021–22 aid budget, the government effectively suggested it could achieve two incommensurate objectives at once: on the one hand it was ‘freezing’ aid spending, while on the other, it was increasing aid to the region (see Howes, 2021b). For example, in a post-2021–22 budget interview, the Minister for International Development and the Pacific, Zed Seselja, rejected the notion that the aid budget had been cut.3 Instead, Seselja emphasised how the ‘baseline’ of the aid budget would remain at $4 billion, with ‘additional support’ supplementary to this baseline being provided to support the region’s COVID-19 response (Seselja, 2021). It was especially instructive that Seselja studiously avoided providing a figure for Australia’s total ODA contribution (Howes, 2021b).

What explains this ambiguous approach to communicating the aid budget? Our explanation, in summary, is that this ambiguity is a product of an emergent political equilibrium that is forming around Australia’s aid program, a consensus we have labelled the ‘cautious consensus’—in part to distinguish it from the ‘golden consensus’ that operated for a decade from the mid-2000s (see Day, 2016). Our description of this consensus relates to the caution required for

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1 Both here, and over the course of the article, we follow the common convention of using ‘aid’ as shorthand for (and synonymous with) Official Development Assistance (ODA), an internationally recognised standard overseen by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC).

2 As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020–21 budget was delayed. It was handed down in October 2020, rather than in May, the traditional date. The 2021–22 budget was delivered in May.

3 A day earlier, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison responded to the same interviewer’s (Kieran Gilbert) question about the decreasing aid budget by saying, ‘We continue to increase our support ...’ (Morrison, 2021).
the Australian Government to balance the clear demands for additional aid spending in the region with fears of public backlash in Australia.

Our findings are based on a series of interviews conducted with 19 federal parliamentarians and six key informants (from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [DFAT] and Australian non-government organisations [NGOs]) during the Australian winter in July and August 2020, the most challenging period in the pandemic response in Australia that year. The 19 parliamentarians were selected because they had been participants in the Australian Regional Leadership Initiative (ARLI) implemented by Save the Children Australia, an initiative partly funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation with the objective of providing parliamentarians the opportunity to undertake ‘learning visits’ to recipient countries of Australian aid (see Wells, 2018). This study functioned as a supplementary exercise to a review of ARLI and involved asking participants a series of questions to prompt them to consider the potential impact of COVID-19 on Australian aid policy. Participating parliamentarians included members of both the major political parties—the centre-left Labor Party and the centre-right Liberal Party (which governs in coalition with the National Party when in government)—as well as a minority party. Together, these parliamentarians represented all states in Australia. While diverse in party affiliation and levels of knowledge of development and foreign affairs, the participating parliamentarians can all be considered broadly pro-aid, given their participation in ARLI. Therefore, we do not claim that this research is representative of attitudes to aid across the Australian parliament. Nonetheless, by canvassing and then analysing the views of aid-friendly parliamentarians from both sides of the political aisle, we are able to offer ‘real-time’ views of emerging priorities and concerns in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We find that there is broad recognition among parliamentarians of the strategic importance of Australian aid in Asia and the Pacific in the context of COVID-19. Health security, maintaining regional stability and countering the expanding role of China were identified as key factors in a rationale for increasing aid in response to the pandemic. Yet among parliamentarians there was also considerable concern about domestic perceptions of any aid budget increase, at a time of significant economic challenges for Australian citizens. The parliamentarians interviewed were acutely aware both of the need for increased aid to the region to promote Australia’s interests in the context of its COVID-19 response, and of the dangers of a public backlash against foreign aid. Unlike the much promoted aid scale-up during the ‘golden consensus’ years, the increases in response to COVID-19 appear to have been deliberately low-key (Galloway, 2021b).

The remainder of this article unfolds as follows. First, in order to contextualise our findings, in Section 2 we trace the pre-COVID-19 history of the Australian aid program, showing how it has comprised of three distinct eras, punctuated by periods of rapid and significant realignment. We also describe how major instances of aid policy change have responded to recalibrations in elite perspectives on the appropriate role and focus of the aid program. Section 3 presents the data from our interviews with parliamentarians and key informants, highlighting how their collective responses to questions about how the COVID-19 pandemic will impact Australian aid gravitate around three key concerns: balancing humanitarian needs and Australia’s national interest; countering Chinese influence in the region; and preventing a domestic backlash against aid spending.

In Section 4, we draw on these findings to contemplate the characteristics of an emerging ‘fourth era’ of Australian aid, which we argue will be underpinned by a ‘cautious consensus’. We sketch out the characteristics of this emerging consensus by contrasting it with the earlier ‘golden consensus’ that prevailed from 2004 to 2013 and saw Australia’s aid spending rise dramatically. As the name suggests, we expect the ‘cautious consensus’ to describe a political consensus that seeks an aid program that is more pragmatic, incremental and circumspect in its outlook than
during the ‘golden consensus’. And given this consensus rests in large part on fears of instability and external influence in Australia's region, it may also prove more durable than the earlier settlement, which placed a higher priority on reducing poverty.

2 | BEFORE COVID-19: THREE ERAS OF AUSTRALIAN AID

In this section, we briefly outline the history of the Australian aid program prior to COVID-19 using Howes’ (2015) ‘three eras’ of Australian aid framework. Howes identifies the first period of Australian aid as the ‘aid as backwater’ era. It lasts roughly three decades and features a slow but steady increase in aid spending. A decade-long ‘golden consensus’ era follows. During this period, aid spending volumes grow by over 80% in real terms, reaching a historical aid spending peak of $5.5 billion in 2013 (Day, 2016). The election of the Abbott Coalition government then triggers what Howes (2015) terms the ‘retrenchment’ era, where aid spending decreases at an even more rapid rate than it had expanded.

Yet more than simply mapping neatly onto a clear financial trajectory (see Figure 1), Howes’ framework also conveys how the history of Australian aid can be conceptualised as comprising three distinct periods of elite consensus concerning the high-level role and purpose of the aid program. In other words, the Australian aid system adheres to the punctuated equilibrium

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FIGURE 1   Australian aid over time (current prices, millions) and Official Development Assistance (ODA) as a proportion of gross national income (GNI) over time. Source: Devpolicy Australian Aid Tracker

4 This conceptualisation is also deployed by the Australian Aid Tracker, which was created and is maintained by the Development Policy Centre at The Australian National University: see https://devpolicy.org/aidtracker/. The Australian Aid Tracker has useful visualisations and infographics related to the historical trajectory of Australian aid spending, among other data. Unless otherwise indicated, the figures quoted in the remainder of this article are obtained from this resource.
model of policy change, whereby long periods of relative policy stasis are followed by rapid and significant realignments in the political consensus on aid, before another period of equilibrium is reached (see Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). In keeping with this model, instances of significant aid policy change in Australia have tended to accompany heightened levels of attention from political elites, often coinciding with changes in government, as we discuss further below. This suggests that capturing the views of Australian political elites in ‘real time’, in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, is likely to prove illuminating when anticipating the future direction of Australian aid policy.

The theoretical and empirical literature on the domestic politics of aid donors reinforces this notion. In summary, the unique characteristics of the aid policy domain mean that high-level aid policy change is especially likely to be driven by political elites (Day, 2018; Lancaster, 2007; Lundsgaarde, 2013; Spratt, 2018; Wells, 2019). Donor spending on aid programs ostensibly benefits recipients abroad, not primarily domestic citizens. This, in turn, changes the domestic political calculus that operates within the aid policy system. Aid policy tends to be a low priority for the public, the media and, crucially, for parliamentarians. And with political attention typically allocated elsewhere, elite actors within the aid policy domain—party leaders (e.g., Day, 2018), ministers (e.g., Vereker, 2002) and occasionally bureaucrats (e.g., Cumming, 2018)—wield considerable influence in decision-making, especially concerning the overall direction of the aid program.

Recent studies confirm these decision-making dynamics also operate in the Australian aid system. For example, Corbett’s (2017) history of the Australian aid program consistently highlights the crucial role of executive discretion, while Wells (2019) highlights how the highly centralised budget process in Australia, operating through the Expenditure Review Committee of Cabinet, further propels the centralisation of decision-making around aid volumes. None of this is to deny the role of public opinion in shaping Australian aid policy (for an overview of how, see Wood, 2018). Indeed, the interview data we report below shows that Australian politicians are acutely aware of how aid issues are perceived by their constituents. Yet rather than playing a direct role in getting aid policy issues onto the political agenda, public opinion concerning aid tends to be anticipated and mediated by political elites, influencing aid policy decisions in an indirect manner that is difficult to capture in a straightforward relationship. Having highlighted the outsized role political elites play in determining the overall direction of Australian aid policy, we now move to briefly discuss the three broad eras of political consensus that comprise the history of Australian aid.

2.1 From ‘aid as backwater’ to the ‘golden consensus’

The roughly three-decade period from late 1973, when an independent agency responsible for the Australian aid program was first established, was one of incremental change. While the aid budget grew slowly but steadily—average real growth in the size of the aid program over this period amounted to 1% per year (Howes, 2015)—Australia’s generosity, measured by aid as a percentage of gross national income (GNI), dwindled. Until the late 1980s, Australia’s geostrategic interests in the Cold War loomed large as a consideration for the aid program. Yet at the same time, with the formation of a dedicated aid agency—first under the Whitlam government and then adapted progressively under the Fraser and Hawke governments—expertise in aid programming expanded within the bureaucracy. Overall, however, as Howes’ (2015) label denotes, aid
remained a political backwater during this time with no rapid shifts in policy or approach and with few powerful political advocates prioritising the aid program.

This changed in the mid-2000s, when what the journalist Graeme Dobell (2010) would later dub the ‘golden consensus’ emerged, whereby ‘the privileged place of aid in the budget scramble ... arrived without much public debate’. For a decade from 2003–04 to 2012–13, aid spending increased by an average of 7% per annum, in real terms. The Howard government initiated the scale-up, with Prime Minister John Howard himself announcing his intention to double the aid budget by 2010 at the UN World Summit in New York in 2005 (Howard, 2005). This decision was made during a period when significant attention was being paid to aid volumes around the world, including in Australia. The Make Poverty History campaign and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were prominent. Perhaps even more importantly, this was also a period of strong economic growth in Australia due to the mining boom. In the platform it took to the 2007 election, the Labor party promised to outdo the Coalition on aid by committing to increase the aid program to 0.5% of GNI by 2013. In effect, this meant a future Rudd government was committing to a doubling of the Howard government’s doubling of the aid budget. In the first budget it passed after winning the election, the Rudd government in May 2008 implemented the largest single-year increase in the history of the aid program. Further large increases followed, driving huge increases in staff at the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), by now the formal name of the agency overseeing Australia’s aid program.

The era of the ‘golden consensus’ in Australian aid was characterised not only by the bipartisan commitment to increasing aid spending, but also by the relative public attention aid policy received (Wood et al., 2021, p. 1). As mentioned above, Prime Minister Howard used a United Nations speech as a platform to announce the doubling of aid; Kevin Rudd, who defeated Howard in the 2007 federal election, strategically used the widely publicised aid increases to increase his appeal to young voters (Corbett, 2017). This era of Australian aid also saw more emphasis on poverty reduction, relative to national interest concerns. The prominence of the MDGs meant that an AusAID focus on poverty reduction resonated with an international narrative about aid and the ‘end of poverty’. In retrospect, however, the briefly bipartisan ‘golden consensus’ proved to be narrow, shallow and isolated (Day, 2016). Once fiscal pressures mounted in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, the limited and contingent nature of high-level political support for the scale-up outside of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd became clear. From the moment Rudd was deposed as prime minister by his own party, and replaced with Julia Gillard, the future of the 0.5% target was in serious doubt. Further, as Corbett (2017, p. 113) notes, Rudd’s personal attention to aid policy made it a ‘political and bureaucratic target’ after Labor lost the 2013 election.

2.2 | Retrenchment and its aftermath

The return of the Coalition to government in the 2013 election, led by Tony Abbott, brought a dramatic end to the ‘golden consensus’ and ushered in a series of historically severe cuts to the aid budget. This series of cuts under successive Liberal governments brought the aid budget down from its peak of $5.5 billion in 2012–13 to just over $4.1 billion in 2019–20. Australia’s generosity as a donor fell to historically low levels, reaching 0.21% of GNI in 2019. This period also saw the return of political partisanship around aid, with the Labor Party criticising the large cuts to the program.

More than simply referring to spending cuts, however, Howes’ (2015) description of the era after 2013 as one of ‘retrenchment’ equally applies to the institutional make-up of the aid
program. Early in the Abbott government, AusAID was disbanded as an executive agency and absorbed into DFAT. Moore (2019) and Wood et al. (2017) document a significant loss of foreign aid expertise within DFAT over this period due to the integration and the retrenchment of many experienced aid program managers and advisers. The raison d’être for the aid program also shifted in these years of declining aid volumes. The Abbott government initiated a review of the aid program, which more explicitly cemented national interest as the program’s central goal and emphasised ‘economic diplomacy’ (DFAT, 2014). The Abbott government also rightly anticipated that these changes to the aid program would spark only muted criticism from the Australian public.

The period after 2013 therefore represented a profound disjuncture from the era of the ‘golden consensus’, not only because of declining levels of aid, but also due to the loss of specialised aid expertise from the bureaucracy and the repositioning of Australian aid towards functioning more as an instrument of national interest. During the retrenchment era, spending on education and health diminished (Wood et al., 2021), though this period did see the establishment of the new Indo-Pacific Centre for Health Security, for example. And yet even the naming of this new policy initiative revealed the turn towards emphasising geopolitics (by invoking the new ‘Indo-Pacific’ nomenclature) and security (by explicitly labelling the initiative as an investment in ‘health security’).

The geographic orientation of the aid program also shifted—towards the Pacific and away from Asia and especially Africa. As Middleton (2020, p. 51) observed, ‘in the five years to 2019–20, the government cut official development assistance to South-East Asia by 30 per cent, and to Indonesia by 50 per cent’. Conversely, ‘since 2017–18, the Pacific’s share of Australian aid has risen considerably’ (Wood et al., 2021, p. 12). While this trend has been framed as part of Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s ‘Pacific Step-up’, his signature foreign policy initiative (Morrison, 2018), the motivation for refocusing the aid program on the Pacific appeared to be primarily driven by seeking to offset China’s influence (Day, 2020b; Wood et al., 2021, p. 12).

Overall, as the 2010s proceeded, a sense of strategic drift formed around the direction of Australia’s aid program (Moore, 2019). This coincided with a broader sense of uncertainty as to how Australia should adjust to its rapidly changing strategic environment. Allan Gyngell (2019, p. 27), in an essay contemplating how Australia should handle its increasingly difficult relationship with China, observed how the Australian public, along with its political elite, have recently been forced to reckon with the disturbing reality that ‘the comforting familiarity of the post–World War II era has ended and the strangeness of our international environment, including China’s centrality, is here to stay’.

Recognising the need to recalibrate Australia’s aid policy in response to a rapidly changing international environment, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Marise Payne, and the then Minister for International Development and the Pacific, Alex Hawke, announced in December 2019 that the Australian Government was preparing a new international development policy (Payne & Hawke, 2019). An expert panel, led by Dennis Richardson, a former Secretary of both the Department of Defence and DFAT, was appointed to provide independent advice on the way forward. Thus, even before the onset of COVID-19, there was recognition that Australia needed to rethink its international development policy.

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5 Moore (2019, p. i) reports how ‘almost 1000 years of experience left [DFAT] shortly after [the] integration [of AusAID within DFAT]’ while an estimated additional 1000 years of experience left DFAT in the following 5 years.
2.3 | Response to COVID-19

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a rapid reassessment of the Australian aid program. Over the course of 2020, these changes were manifest via significant changes to the overarching strategy, spending commitments and organisational structure of the program. The policy process that was underway to develop a new international development policy was aborted, with the government instead announcing in late May an ‘unprecedented pivot of [its] development program’ to ‘minimise the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic’ in the Pacific (Payne & Hawke, 2020b). Partnerships for Recovery set out Australia’s COVID-19 development response, identifying three ‘core action areas’: health security; stability; and economic recovery (DFAT, 2020a). The policy emphasised a whole-of-government response concentrated on Australia’s neighbourhood, with the Pacific, Timor-Leste and Indonesia singled out as ‘first-tier priorities’.

On the spending front, initial projections for 2020–21 showed the aid budget falling to its lowest ever level in terms of percentage of Australia’s GNI. Yet as the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic became clear, the Australian Government responded by announcing a series of new aid commitments. First, Australia committed an additional $80 million to the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation (GAVI) COVAX Facility Advance Market Commitment. The government then announced a ‘new, temporary’ $304.7 million COVID-19 Response Package for the Pacific (DFAT, 2020c). ‘We have never faced a challenge of the scale of COVID-19’, Minister Payne said, ‘but we will combat it together as a Pacific family’ (Payne & Hawke, 2020a). Instructively, this announcement came at a low point in the news cycle, on Thursday 1 April 2020, the day before Good Friday. Six months later, in late October, the government were reporting that 400 individual programs, worth $840 million were being delivered under the Partnerships for Recovery banner (Payne & Hawke, 2020c), although it was unclear what proportion of this could be categorised as aid spending.

In November 2020, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced an additional $485 million package of support for Southeast Asia.⁶ Taken together, these additional commitments are estimated to represent approximately a 9% increase in the aid budget from the previous year (Howes, 2021a). Yet this increase has garnered very little attention. As highlighted earlier, the additional spending commitments were deliberately bracketed off from Australia’s official estimates for aid spending, and few efforts were made to promote the new spending in Australia’s media. Howes (2021a) aptly described the government’s stance as one of ‘nothing-happening-here’.

Along with the quiet increases to aid commitments, changes were made to the institutional arrangements for aid. In September 2020, DFAT’s acting deputy secretary, Kathy Klugman, confirmed at a parliamentary hearing that the Office of Development Effectiveness (ODE) was ‘no longer a standalone … entity’. Klugman said there had been some ‘adjustments to the structure of the department’ and that the functions of the ODE were still being performed within DFAT (Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, 2020). As noted by Howes (2020), while there had been no official notice about the fate of ODE’s external oversight body, the Independent Evaluation Committee (IEC), it too had been axed. In February 2021, a DFAT memo emerged which revealed that the decision to shut both the ODE and IEC had been made the previous year ‘bearing in mind the need to find departmental budget savings’ (Galloway, 2021a). Despite Klugman’s assurances to the parliamentary committee that evaluation of the development program was ‘still a top priority’ for the department, there has been a loss of

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⁶ It is not yet clear how much of this amount would be classified as ODA. Howes (2021a) estimated that $360 million would be ODA.
staff capacity dedicated to development effectiveness. Combined with the hollowing out of aid capacity within DFAT since 2012, the stripping back of oversight bodies in 2020 reveals further doubts about the capacity of DFAT to oversee a high-quality and transparent aid program, especially given the rapid recent changes to the program and the understandably urgent and ad hoc nature of the COVID-19 response.

3 | DURING COVID-19: ELITE PERSPECTIVES ON HOW THE PANDEMIC WILL IMPACT AUSTRALIAN AID

In this section, we present new empirical evidence concerning the potential future of Australian aid in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We draw primarily on interviews with 19 parliamentarians, but also incorporate insights from six additional key informants (from academia, NGOs and DFAT). As indicated earlier, the sample of parliamentarians were chosen due to their involvement in the ARLI program. Given this, all interviewees can be assumed to be at least interested in learning more about Australian aid, with most being broadly supportive of the aid program. Within these parameters, this sample of parliamentarians is nonetheless relatively representative of the Parliament. This sample included 11 male and 8 female parliamentarians, of which 11 represented the Labor Party and 7 were Liberal party members (with one participant from the cross bench). Those interviewed included a mix of both Senators and Members of the House of Representatives, and each state in Australia was represented by at least one parliamentarian we interviewed.

Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 25 and 60 minutes. They included questions about parliamentarian experiences of ARLI exposure visits—as all of the parliamentarians involved had participated in at least one exposure visit to either Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Middle East, or the Pacific. The interviews also explicitly included questions about the impact the COVID-19 pandemic would have on the shape of the Australian aid program. The interviews took place in July and August 2020, when Australia (like many other countries) was in various stages of lockdown, and therefore at a time when the global health and economic impacts of the pandemic were very much top of mind. Across the remainder of this section, we document parliamentarians’ responses across three dominant themes that emerged following an analysis of the data.

3.1 | Balancing humanitarian needs and Australian interests

Interviews with parliamentarians and key informants during this time revealed a widespread recognition of the importance of the aid program in the context of COVID-19. Parliamentarians from both major parties said that the pandemic had increased the need for aid in Australia’s region, but as is invariably the case when it comes to ‘big picture’ donor priorities, the challenge of balancing humanitarian needs with national interests is central. For some, humanitarian concerns were at the forefront. One Labor MP (Int 1) said, ‘[Australia] should be a very generous and humane country that doesn’t cut back their foreign aid but looks to enhance it. Not just for security reasons but because it’s the right thing to do.’ Another parliamentarian said that Australia should look to expand its assistance to neighbouring countries. I could ‘just imagine the COVID scene in one of those [PNG] hospitals’, reflected the cross-bench MP (Int 5). Other Liberal and Labor MPs stressed a need for Australia to play a humanitarian role in the pandemic arguing that
Australia has the governance structures and resources to deal with a global crisis, while some of our neighbouring countries do not. ‘They’re the ones we need to help get through this’, concluded a Labor MP (Int 11).

While humanitarian concerns were at the forefront for some participants, the most pressing issues for parliamentarians were national interest concerns relating to health security, regional stability and countering the threat of China. For some parliamentarians, health security was a key motivator for increasing commitments to the aid program. ‘We want PNG not to have [COVID-19 outbreaks]’, said a Labor MP (Int 12), adding ‘you can walk on a good day to PNG from northern Queensland. We want our neighbours to be safe. There’s a strategic aim there.’ Or, more starkly, another Labor MP (Int 21) said, ‘if there is a massive outbreak in PNG, then it will come through the Torres Strait, it will come through Cairns. That is what will happen.’

Political and economic stability in the region was also a particular concern for many, who recognised Australia’s ‘special role ... in relation to the Pacific’ (Int 8, Liberal). ‘In relation to aid and development, the vulnerabilities of the Pacific are there’, reflected one Labor MP (Int 2), noting the Pacific is ‘on trend to be the least developed part of the world on the human development index—worse than Africa, sub-Saharan Africa. It looks like COVID will accelerate that disparity.’ This MP went on to say that:

If you’re serious about your relationships and partnership and you’re serious about the development goals and your strategic interests, then it’s going to need an increase in investment just to tread water when you’ve got an economy that’s collapsing with 40 to 60% of their GDP wiped out. (Int 2, Labor)

Similarly, another Labor MP (Int 1) observed how:

If this coronavirus explodes in Papua New Guinea, or explodes in other parts of the Pacific, or in Southeast Asia ... that’s going to be Australia’s problem as well. Whether it’s markets collapsing, whether it’s our ability to export to these countries, whether it’s countries significantly reducing the amount of people who are visiting here, or studying here, or coming to Australia.

3.2 | Concern about Chinese influence in the region

Undergirding these strategic arguments about stability in Australia’s region were broader fears that the COVID-19 pandemic could allow China to gain greater influence in the region. Parliamentarians interviewed in this study, from both major parties, saw the pandemic as exacerbating pre-existing competition in the region. These views were very closely aligned with those reflected in the 2020 Defence Strategic Update, released on 1 July 2020, which noted that ‘in this era of considerable change, the COVID-19 pandemic is creating even more uncertainty’. Even more explicitly, it acknowledged that ‘strategic competition between the United States and China is unlikely to abate, and the pandemic has sharpened aspects of this competition’ (Department of Defence, 2020, p. 15).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia already provided nearly five times more aid to the Pacific than China (Wood, 2020). Yet the COVID-19 pandemic was portrayed by parliamentarians as a strategic opportunity to exert greater power in the Pacific and Southeast Asia. The pandemic brought ‘greater incentives for ... China and so on to come in dangling loans and gifts',
one Labor MP (Int 12) argued, ‘... because the environment will be more desperate. People will have their backs against the wall.’ A Liberal MP (Int 6) similarly reflected that ‘China may use [the pandemic] as an opportunity to build their institutional presence in these countries [in the region] ... our concern, my concern is how are they misusing the crisis to do that’.

A number of parliamentarians, across both major parties, expected that support for aid commitments within government will increase with growing international competition in the region. A Labor MP (Int 11) stressed the importance of increasing Australia’s role in the region during the time of the pandemic: ‘In a time when there [are] tensions in the region about who’s more influential across the Pacific. If anything ... this is the time to step up and actually do it.’ A Liberal MP (Int 9) said ‘there’s almost a cold war arms race developing in relation to aid’, adding this would lead to ‘countries focusing on [aid] more, including Australia’. A Labor MP (Int 12) concluded that ‘if we’re not there, China will be’.

The issue of China’s influence in the region was a motivator for conservative MPs in particular to recognise the importance of Australia’s aid program. A Liberal MP (Int 6) spoke of the sentiment in the party in relation to aid saying, ‘at the moment, there’s no appetite to create space for the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] to expand its reach of influence, its arms of influence, in our region’. A chief of staff to a Labor MP (Int 23) meanwhile reflected that the threat of Chinese influence in the region had produced a shift in conservative views on aid. Speaking about conservative MPs, they suggested that the role of aid in countering the rise of Chinese influence was ‘all they listen to’ (Int 23). They argued that ‘if [discussion about the influence of China] is what needs to be ramped up to get [the government] to maintain or increase their aid, then I think it should be used to try and do that’. Whereas the goal of poverty reduction proved to be one of partisan disagreement during the period of the Abbott government, the threat of Chinese influence is a concern shared across parliamentarians from both major parties. More broadly, this suggests that the left-right divide that Wood (2018) describes in public opinion on Australia’s foreign aid, may recede into the future in the context of the perception of threat posed by China.

Clearly, this emerging bipartisan support for growth in the aid program—as a counter to the growth of Chinese influence in Australia’s region—is constructed on a very different basis to the bipartisan consensus that operated during the ‘golden consensus’, when international focus on poverty reduction and the MDGs was far more prominent. The aid program, as one Liberal MP suggested (Int 6), is now being ‘repurposed’ towards projecting Australia’s influence in the region. In this sense, they went on to explain, the government can’t just ‘eat into it’ with budget cuts—as was done after 2013—as such cuts directly affect Australia’s strategic goals. The various responses relating to China’s influence in the Pacific confirm the widely held view that Prime Minister Morrison’s signature foreign policy initiative, the ‘Pacific Step-up’, is motivated, in large part, by a desire to counter Chinese influence in the region. This ‘cold war arms race’ (Int 9, Liberal) aspect to regional geopolitics is likely to mean that the $4 billion ‘core budget’ will effectively function as a spending floor, becoming a threshold below which aid spending is unlikely to dip substantially below. Whereas the ‘golden consensus’ of the mid-2000s developed only shallow roots, the emerging bipartisan support for increasing aid is based on fears of geopolitical instability in the region—a platform which may ultimately prove more durable, especially in the context of ongoing strategic competition between the United States and China.

Securing Australia’s national interest and having an effective and professional poverty reduction program are not necessarily at odds. At the 2019 Australasian Aid Conference, DFAT secretary Frances Adamson said, ‘I strongly believe that Australia’s national interest is best served through a well-resourced and effective, highly professional development assistance program that delivers on our long-term interests in our partners’ prosperity’ (Adamson, 2019). Yet with a sharp
focus on national interest objectives in a period of global crisis, and with a progressive stripping back of expertise and capacity in Australia’s aid program in recent years, the challenges to effective aid programing, which prioritises poverty reduction, are far greater now than during the period of the ‘golden consensus’ in the 2000s.

3.3 | Preventing a domestic backlash against aid spending

While the renewed importance of Australian aid in the region was a key feature of the responses of parliamentarians and key informants, another consistent theme across the interviews was fear of domestic backlash to an increase in foreign aid. Public opinion surveys reveal that Australians are generally supportive of aid (Wood, 2018). That support, however, is not deep, and when faced with trade-offs, most Australians supported significant aid cuts under the Abbott government in 2015 (Wood, 2018). Furthermore, in a context of an economic crisis, extant research would tend to suggest that public support for aid spending is likely to fall. Yet evidence from opinion polling in Australia, conducted by The Australian National University’s Development Policy Centre (Wood et al., 2020) suggests that broad levels of support for foreign aid had not shifted discernibly, at least in the early stages of the pandemic.

Parliamentarians involved in this research, however, were acutely aware of their own constituencies and the capacity for criticism of aid in the context of COVID-19. Fear of public backlash from the Australian public featured prominently in all interviews, often as the first response to an open question about the pandemic and Australian aid. In particular this fear focused on a perception of an ‘Australians are first’ narrative among opponents of aid—a narrative galvanised by the domestic challenges caused by COVID-19. A Labor MP (Int 10) for example said, ‘I think it’s going to be really challenging ... I think that racism, bigotry, xenophobia, nativism are all going to raise their heads in a very deep way ... a charity begins at home type mentality’. Similarly, a Liberal MP (Int 19) felt that backbench members of parliament would be receiving negative public responses to any increases in the aid budget. ‘I can guarantee you this ... what [backbenchers] will be hearing is people are doing it tough. “I've lost my job. The unemployment rate has doubled from 5% to 10% and you’re giving millions of dollars overseas. What the hell are you doing?”’, they said (Int 19).

The rate of unemployment in Australia was often seen as a point of particular concern for domestic constituencies and central to a narrative opposing overseas aid. A Labor MP (Int 12) noted growing numbers of Australians becoming unemployed and dependent on state support. ‘I think people are anxious’, they said (Int 12). ‘If their employer doesn’t have JobKeeper,’ for example, at that point, do they lose their jobs? Then they’re thinking, well, I might be dependent on the government, so why is the government sending money offshore?’ Similarly, a Liberal MP (Int 21) said, ‘everywhere I travel people divide themselves up between those who have a secure job and those who don’t. That is the main focus for them ... I don’t think there is an appetite ... for increasing aid.’ This was not just perceived to be an Australian issue with one Labor MP (Int 1) putting this dynamic in Australia into a global perspective. ‘COVID broadly is putting more pressure on counties to look inwards as opposed to outwards’, they concluded (Int 1).

While the majority of participants in this study were pessimistic about public reactions to aid during the COVID-19 pandemic, some presented more optimistic reflections. An aid policy

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7 ‘JobKeeper’ is the name of the payment scheme established by the Australian Government to support employers to retain staff during the COVID-19 pandemic.
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analyst from an NGO (Int 26) said that ‘COVID-19 presents an opportunity to communicate how we are interconnected and how the issues that develop in our region or around the world are not just issues for those countries; they’re issues for all of us’. A Labor MP (Int 12) similarly suggested that the context of COVID-19 was an opportunity ‘to appeal to people’s better natures’ and elicit greater generosity as Australians recognised the plight of people in other countries.

Overall, however, recognition of intense domestic challenges as a result of COVID-19 and a potential backlash against aid were central themes within interviews with parliamentarians from both major parties. Parliamentarians were concerned that groups already hostile to foreign aid could latch onto a narrative which portrayed Australian citizens as being neglected during a time of crisis. The interviews revealed, on the one hand, a growing consensus around the need for a more robust aid program. Yet on the other hand, they revealed fears from members of both major parties about a backlash against aid from segments of the Australian public. This dilemma for parliamentarians sheds light on the ‘nothing to see here’ approach taken by the government in announcing new commitments to aid in 2020. The case for additional aid commitments in the context of COVID-19 was strong, yet increases needed to be managed in order to minimise potential negative reactions from those segments of the public vehemently opposed to aid.

4 | CONCLUSION: CONTEMPLATING AN EMERGING ‘CAUTIOUS CONSENSUS’ ON AUSTRALIAN AID BEYOND COVID-19

Since its onset in early 2020, COVID-19 has claimed millions of lives around the world. It is widely considered to represent the biggest disruption to the global economy and international politics since the Second World War. As such, there is a strong likelihood that the pandemic will function as a critical juncture in many realms of social and political life, including in ways we are yet to anticipate. The prospect of the crisis acting as a hinge in the history of global development has begun to be explored (Day, 2020a; Kharas, 2021; Leach et al., 2021). As for the future of the Australian aid program, based on our analysis of the views of Australian parliamentarians, we detect the emergence of a new political consensus surrounding the role and purpose of Australian aid. The history of Australian aid suggests this consensus—which we characterise as a ‘cautious consensus’—could prevail for a considerable time. Furthermore, our findings are consistent with early assessments of the likely impact of COVID-19 on the future shape of the Australian aid program (Teskey & Tyrrel, 2020; Wood, 2020).

We can now return to the question posed at the outset of this article: what explains the government’s ambiguous approach to communicating the aid budget? Our analysis shows that this ambiguity is a manifestation of seeking to juggle three often incompatible priorities simultaneously. Increases to foreign aid were portrayed by participants in this study as being justified primarily by Australia’s national interest and particularly by perceived threats to our health security, economy and influence in the region. In contrast to the rhetoric of ‘ending poverty’ during the ‘golden consensus’, the years of aid cuts since 2013 have seen a sedimentation of national interest as a more central motivation for aid. COVID-19 will further embed this trend. We anticipate that, as the ‘cautious consensus’ consolidates, the aid program will be increasingly framed in a way that is oriented towards reducing external threats. This shift towards aid increasingly serving national interest objectives—notably including mitigating Chinese influence, especially in the Pacific—may prove a more robust platform for maintaining and increasing aid spending volumes than the altruistic goal of poverty reduction. At the same time, as Wood (2020) noted, the stronger focus on national interest in Australian aid, and the strengthening of geostrategic
rationales for the aid program, may undermine the effectiveness of Australian aid responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the region. Wood’s comment demonstrates how, for proponents of development, there are both positives and negatives to this emerging new disposition.

During the ‘golden consensus’ era, both major parties were committed to increasing the aid budget. The return to a consensus around increasing aid spending therefore risks being interpreted by some as a potential return to the period of aid increases during the ‘golden consensus’. What is clear from our analysis, however, is that the emerging era of Australian aid will be profoundly different to this earlier political consensus. The period of the ‘golden consensus’ saw a strong poverty reduction mandate coupled with a dramatic scaling up of personnel and capacity in AusAID as an executive agency of government. As already discussed, in contrast to the ‘golden consensus’, increases in aid spending after the COVID-19 pandemic will likely receive limited fanfare, be oriented primarily towards national interest, and be implemented by a department with less expertise and capacity in aid programing. While we may see increases in aid quantity, a combination of fear of public backlash, national interest framing, and limitations of capacity and oversight, present significant dangers for the future quality and effectiveness of Australian aid programing.

Further, whereas the ‘golden consensus’ was built around reaching an aid spending ceiling (0.5%), the ‘cautious consensus’ coheres around the recognition that aid spending should not drop further than current levels, while leaving room to grow modestly into the future. Whereas the ‘golden consensus’ was transformational in its objectives, the ‘cautious consensus’, as the name suggests, will feature more incremental, under-the-radar change. While the ‘golden consensus’ saw the geographical reach of Australia’s aid program expand, including to Africa and the Caribbean, the ‘cautious consensus’ will focus much closer to home. And while the ‘golden consensus’ offered space for innovative and imaginative policy responses, the ‘cautious consensus’ will prioritise more pragmatic policy action. Finally, whereas a certain degree of hubris surrounded the ‘golden consensus’, the ‘cautious consensus’ shapes as more circumspect. Perhaps, given the shock and disruption brought by COVID-19, and how this has reinforced the power shifts underway in global politics, this posture is to be expected, if not entirely welcomed.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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