

## Fierravanti-Wells comment on China's Pacific aid was out of line

By **John McCarthy**

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It is a strange time of the year. People say bizarre things and newspapers, looking for stories, print them. And then real news is created. The first question arising from the comments by our Minister for International Development, Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, about the quality of Chinese aid to the Pacific region is: Why make them?

Apparently she wanted to highlight issues raised by Maurice Newman ("China emerges as all-powerful new deity in Pacific cargo cult", *The Australian*, 1/1). He argued China was usurping our influence in the South Pacific.

It was nonetheless an odd way to go about it. And if the Chinese are behaving badly, should we not hear from the islanders first? They are, after all, accepting the aid.

But the minister's remarks also raise more important points on our foreign policy about which both government and opposition (which on this issue are bathing themselves in virtue) might ponder. Good foreign policy practitioners only go on the offensive when they have to. That is, either to pursue a real interest or to defend a strong and justifiable policy.

It is also because the more a nation criticises another, the less notice will be taken of the criticism, including when it is over a matter of genuine national interest. Otherwise, it's crying wolf. There is no point in taking a swing at a country, friend or opponent, just to feel good. The issue has to be important and the comment constructive.

And of course countries don't forget these things. When we get ourselves into difficulties, or need that country for something, guess what happens?

In relation specifically to China, there have been a number of recent instances where the conduct of Chinese foreign policy has been out of line. Where this directly affects us and we have evidence of malpractice in China's dealings with us, we should say so, if need be publicly, but without unnecessary repetition or the note of occasional hysteria to which our political class is prone.

The minister's remarks will be read in China against everything else we have been saying on China in the past few months and the impact of our cumulative comments will be disproportionate to what our interests require. This is not good policy.

And although China has been prone to international behaviour with which we cannot agree, it is not alone in challenging the international order on which we rely. Hence

there is a measure of inconsistency, not so much in the fact but in the drumbeat of our criticism of China.

While on the subject of consistency, it is not a good idea to be critical of another country on reputational issues unless we are very sure of our own standing. People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. They really shouldn't.

The minister put the boot in on some Chinese aid projects (the road going nowhere and so on) in the Pacific, and she may have some of her facts right.

But while we have a good story to tell on Australian aid to the South Pacific, we do not on our overall aid program.

As the Lowy Institute has pointed out, development assistance, while constituting about 1 per cent of the budget between 2013-14 and 2018-19, will have suffered 25 per cent of the budget cuts. As a percentage of GDP, our expenditure on international aid is at its lowest ever.

And let's think before calling out others on ethics. We see our human rights record as second to none. But not everyone sees Australian conduct in the same pristine light as we do, and we do have a case to answer. We have been told by Papua New Guinea to close our detention camps on Manus and the camp in Nauru is an embarrassment. While some of us may be relaxed about pieces critical of our detention policies appearing in international media, others are not. As we like to tell the Chinese, reputation counts.

By all means we should be realistic about China and defend our genuine interests to the end. And of course we should be doing the right thing — and more — by the islands of the South Pacific.

But in the hedonistic splendour of our holiday season, let us be cautious about telling others how to behave until we are sure our own house is in order.

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