

Bono: 'There's a difference between cosyng up to power and being close to power'

Interviewed during a trip to west Africa, campaigner and U2 frontman Bono talks about what drives his activism and responds frankly to criticism of aid to Africa, his relationship with politicians and his group's controversial tax arrangements

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For a week at the end of August Bono was travelling in west Africa, leading an invited group that included Condoleezza Rice, five Republican senators, corporate leaders from companies involved in the RED campaign (which donates money to the Global Fund to fight HIV/Aids), and artists including the LA dubstep pioneer Skrillex. The U2 singer was on what is a regular fact-finding mission - visiting hospitals, civil society organisations, politicians and young entrepreneurs - and introducing his eclectic tour party to some of the issues that his campaigning group ONE.org tries to keep at the forefront of global leaders' minds. Having spent the first half of the tour in Liberia, he was in the Ghanaian capital Accra when this interview took place. A couple of nights earlier at a downtown bar, I'd watched him give an impromptu performance of Stand By Me with the house band. That morning we had met local advocates for the agenda of transparency - both for governance and business in Ghana. During that meeting Bono had heard the news of the death of his friend Seamus Heaney, so we talked first about that, before broadening the discussion to his 25 years as an activist for African development, the lessons he has learned and those he is still learning.

First of all I should say how sorry I was to hear of Seamus's death, I know the two of you were long-standing friends...

You may not know that to every meeting I have ever had since I began full-time advocacy I have brought with me a book of Seamus Heaney's poems. I always think if you are asking somebody for something it is a good idea to give them something first. So I always give them Seamus's poems. This is from the pope to every president I have ever met. In this last week I gave Seamus's book *Electric Light* to President Johnson Sirleaf in Liberia. She is currently obsessed with the efforts to bring electricity to her people, so she could not believe it...

He was a fellow traveller?

Literally so. Seamus has been with me on every journey I have taken and there have been many times when a retreat into his words has kept me afloat. Most of our life in this kind of work is very concrete, full of facts, but we all have to seek redress from time to time in poetry. Seamus was where I went for that. He was the quietest storm that ever blew into town. "From the Republic of Conscience" has been like a Bible for me as an activist, something I have returned to for as long as I can remember. Some of those phrases are like tattoos for me, worn very close to the heart.

It's interesting to hear you make that distinction between the rigour of the arguments you have to put across, and the need for empathy. In a recent TED talk you presented yourself as the "factivist", the nerd who is aroused by the statistics of development, but for all the data there also has to be an emotional engagement for any of this to work?

I think that is why artists are useful in our kind of campaign. As a musician and a songwriter it is an act of the ego to believe that other people might be interested in your point of view. But it is usually an empathetic nature that gets you going in the first place. Music keeps the heart porous in many ways.

Yesterday you were mentioning the former "slave castle" at Elmina on the coast that you visited with some of your group. That seemed quite an emotional journey for all concerned.

It was. And I wasn't expecting it to be. I didn't want to go. I thought I was here with a different agenda. But fate and a really hard-headed tour manager had us there and that obvious thing came home to me full force: that you can't begin to understand this continent without first understanding slavery. As ever the data is not super-sound, but it seems likely that 300 million lives were taken in three centuries. Only a third of those people survived. Hundreds of years of deliberate destruction of the fabric of African life, and the fabric of African families. I had never really confronted those facts in that way. And the guide we had there wasn't letting us off the hook at all. You know, someone said something about "Arab traders", but he came straight back: no, it was always the Europeans who were the cruellest, the worst. They were the drivers of it.

You suggested one of your inspirations as a campaigner was Josiah Wedgwood, and his inclusion of the slogan "Am I not a man and a brother?" in his pottery, which galvanised the abolition movement. Do you see him as a kindred spirit?

It was a kind of blueprint for what we are trying to do, certainly. The way they organised themselves, a lot of artists and writers involved - using slogans, including on bracelets I think. And like us they refused to hold their campaign hostage to a particular ideology. The abolitionists worked not from one political side or another but worked to find a radical centre. That is what we were thinking of when we called this the ONE campaign. That's why we work so hard in involving conservative opinion in it - everyone from religious conservatives to fiscal conservatives - which has made us unpopular with some people. That is also why we try to torture the left over protectionism in Europe as it affects farmers here. We try to be both popular and unpopular with everyone. And the abolitionists were a great model for that. Lincoln, of course, was a republican...

Is that the thinking behind bringing your curious tour party here?

It was the usual social experiment! Just to see Senator Lindsey Graham, Republican member of the Armed Services Committee - and Skrillex. Dada Life sat next to Condi Rice. We were in Liberia, downtown Monrovia, a city that is still emerging from the rubble of civil war, and we are at this beyond-cool village bar and there are these five lawmakers from the most powerful nation on earth listening to Sweetz, the local sensation, as she is shaking her stuff and dancing. I mean: I live for that kind of thing.

What did the senators take from it? Or what do you hope they take from it?

Well it is a commitment for them to come at all. There are no votes for them in building hospitals or supporting the Global Fund on Aids, or putting kids in schools in far-off places. But it works,

once you get them here on the ground. One thing we have found is that the military in the US are more awake to the importance of development in Africa than most other government departments.

Do you spend a lot of time talking to the US military?

Yes, General Jim Jones, who used to run Nato, called me at home on Sunday before we came out. He was the man who introduced me to Bob Gates who used to run the Pentagon. One of the most surreal moments of my life was spent sitting around a table there with all these four-star generals. I said to them: why are you all so interested in what we do? And they tell you in that clipped military speech that in asymmetrical conflicts the largest military force in the world has to think differently. That might is not right when you cannot see the enemy. They understand for example that all their recent problems come from the wider geographical region called the Sahel. It runs all the way across Africa, through Sudan, through Somalia, through Nigeria, right across to Mali. They are realising that here is an unholy weave of what we call the three extremes: extreme poverty, extreme climate and extreme ideology. And they understand that preventing fires is much cheaper than putting them out.

Do you have any qualms about courting those kind of interests?

No. This may be old news but I actually pitched to President Bush to support the campaign for antiretroviral drugs [for HIV/Aids] by saying they would be the best possible advertisement for the United States. I said put stars and stripes on them if you want to, because we were begging for this intervention to prevent this great flood of human lives being lost. I think the official figure is now 6.8 million African lives saved by drugs paid for directly by the American taxpayer. And I don't think it is any coincidence that if you do polls now this region of the world admires the United States more than any other.

The persistent liberal view would be that you should never get into bed with neocons under any circumstances...

Try telling that to the woman who is about to lose her third child to HIV/Aids. I know I couldn't do that.

But isn't the poverty that engenders these catastrophes structural - and created directly by the policies of some western governments?

That these problems are structural is true. Of course it is. And you can always say that tending to the wounded will not stop the war. But the world is an imperfect place, you know. While we are waiting for capitalism to reform itself, or another system to emerge, or for these countries, as Ghana is clearly doing, to move toward the point when they don't need our assistance, we have a problem. What you might call the situation on the ground. And our angle is really that we will use anyone who can help with that. When I came here, and visited hospitals with thousands of people camping outside for treatment, for drugs that were not available, I wanted to do what I could to make the madness stop. Watching lives implode in front of your eyes for no reason. Children in their mother's arms go into that awful silence. And looking to the side and seeing the health workers and seeing the rage inside of them. I just thought: I'll do what I can. And I will talk to anybody.

This was in 1986 when you first came to Ethiopia to work at a refugee camp?

No, no. That was just me and the missus, newly married, who could afford to take five weeks off and go to Africa. We were moved by what we saw, and for ever changed by it. But it all only started to hit home in the 1990s when we got into debt cancellation and began to see that aid could only be a percentage of the solution. I think Live Aid raised £200m and Ethiopia was paying £200m a year in debt interest...

To get to that point, where you would talk to anyone, did you have to make a political shift personally? I assume you were a young lefty?

Yes, very right on. My father was Labour, classic Dublin Northside household. And I still carry that with me. And though I believe that capitalism has been the most effective ideology we have known in taking people out of extreme poverty, I don't think it is the only thing that can do it, and in some ways I wish it wasn't.

On a global scale your initiative RED engages corporations - Starbucks, Apple, Gap and others - in giving a proportion of revenue to the Global Fund. Isn't that just a useful fig leaf for some of these companies, who aren't always famous for their ethical business practices?

I know a lot of your readers might think corporations are inherently bad things. I have to say I really don't. I miss the corner shop as much as the next man, but you know, also, two of the people I most admire in this life are Bill and Melinda Gates. Not only because they gave us a million dollars many years ago to get this campaign organised, but because they wanted to know where every penny of that million dollars was spent. Bill brought the intellectual rigour he had applied to Microsoft, and even some of the muscularity of that, and he employed it to work for the world's poor. I think that is a pretty amazing thing to do.

One of the things that has come out of that rigour has been a shift in your focus from aid to campaigning on issues of trade justice, in particular for greater transparency, not just in governance but on mining contracts and so on. You've been successful in some of those battles - helping to get legislation both in Congress and in the European Union that will require western companies to be much more open in their dealings with African governments. How did that happen?

One thing we have done was to look around at the most successful campaigning organisations. Not the obvious ones. But at the gun lobby in America. The tobacco lobby. Brilliant, brilliant campaigners. And we learn from them. How else do you think the transparency legislation got through the United States Congress in the financial reform bill to the rage of the American petroleum industry - which is now suing the SEC [the Securities and Exchange Commission]?

You like to call this your inside/outside philosophy. How does that work?

Well in one sense we are still outsiders. ONE.org has 4 million signed-up members. They are church people, gay and lesbian activists, soccer moms, kids from DJ culture - you know the range of voices makes them very powerful. They use social media, they can put pressure on politicians over a particular issue very quickly given the right arguments. If you are outside the fence placarding and if you have enough numbers you will be heard. But it is still a conflict. A battle of wills. And once those lines are drawn, as I know from growing up in Ireland, it is very hard to change things. Playing the inside game as well makes it easier.

That inside game sometimes looks like a cosy relationship with power...

It does confuse people. But there is a difference between cosyng up to power and being close to power.

Where was that line with President Bush?

I lambasted Bush face to face for not getting the ARV drugs to people "on bicycles and motorcycles" as he had promised in his state of the union speech. I was definitely being a little verbose, a bit shouty. At one point he banged his hand on the table: "Hold on here, I am the president of the United States!" To this day, when I see him, he stands up and salutes me. But the specific argument was, that year they were supposed to ramp up to \$3bn on Aids expenditure. They stalled at \$2bn. They were claiming that Africa could not absorb the drugs. As a result of that argument and us proving that there was capacity and the drugs would get out, they agreed to \$2.45bn. So the fight got a result.

Did you ever feel you were simply being used by that administration?

It was a risk. When we first talked to them we won a promise but no announcement on the Aids commitment and I had to trust that they were sincere. I shook the hand of Condoleezza Rice. And I walked out of there thinking I had done a decent job, and then I got our board on the phone. We have quite a demanding board [it has included Bill Gates and Warren Buffett among others]. George Soros in particular was horrified. Out of the speakerphone, Soros, one of my great heroes, says to me: "You have sold out for a bowl of lentils! What have you done? How could you take these people at their word?" He was right to question it, but I did believe I could work with these people. We are now \$52bn into that programme...

It is not a popularity contest, this work. But I imagine also you don't become a rock star without a need to be popular. Your press in the UK and Ireland could hardly be much worse. How does that feel?

My personal popularity has been a question of boom and bust really since I was 20. The band thought this would sink the ship 10 years ago. Hanging out with politicians and corporations is very unhip work. But I think that the U2 audience have turned out to be incredibly subtle in their understanding. The thing is, we have a relationship now with our audience that exists outside the media. When you have been singing into somebody's ear for 20 years through a set of headphones, people tend to know if you are an asshole or not. I get to hear the really good or the really bad things in the press, but I don't read it. I can afford to say that because public opinion does not drive U2's audience.

But counter to that, I guess to a degree public opinion does have an influence on your effectiveness in this work. Two criticisms come up time and again. The first is that this is a kind of western vanity project, an imposed solution that places Africa in a position of supplication, and does not involve Africans in that solution. How do you answer that?

Well, I have been working for Africans since I was 18, when I got involved with the Nelson Mandela concerts. I got involved with debt cancellation because Desmond Tutu demanded that the world respond to that situation. The Global Fund, the reason that we are here in Ghana, was the demand of another African, Kofi Annan, a Ghanaian. The transparency agenda that we just had a meeting about is driven by the demands of African civil society organisations, any number of which we are closely involved with. The idea that there is one kind of African is of course ridiculous. Sometimes African entrepreneurs want to kill you because you are saying public

health is the priority, not roads. Of course they are right to press for that issue, but so are we right, I believe, to argue for example that millions of children could and should be vaccinated.

I had a great week not long ago. I was booed on stage in Arusha, Tanzania, at the TED conference which I had campaigned long and hard to have in Arusha, Tanzania. I was booed by all the young entrepreneurs in the audience who thought I was peddling this idea of a supplicant Africa, which I happen to think could not be further from the truth. In the very same week I was chased down the street in Germany by a bunch of anarchists at the G8 summit, wielding placards and shouting "Make Bono history!" - which even as I was running for my life I thought was a pretty good line. So: we are doing something right - we are annoying both the capitalists in Africa, and the anti-capitalists in Europe. The thing is, I am not an idealist, never have been, I am just quite pragmatic about finding solutions.

The other persistent criticism is about the band's decision to offshore part of their income through the Netherlands to avoid tax. Was it not hypocrisy for you to try to hold the Irish government to account for its spending while going through fairly exhaustive efforts to avoid paying into the Irish exchequer yourself?

It is not an intellectually rigorous position unless you understand that at the heart of the Irish economy has always been the philosophy of tax competitiveness. Tax competitiveness has taken our country out of poverty. People in the revenue accept that if you engage in that policy then some people are going to go out, and some people are coming in. It has been a successful policy. On the cranky left that is very annoying, I can see that. But tax competitiveness is why Ireland has stayed afloat. When the Germans tried to impose a different tax regime on the country in exchange for a bailout, the taoiseach said they would rather not have the bailout. So U2 is in total harmony with our government's philosophy.

But surely you have given up some authority in doing so. Was it worth it?

I think for many reasons people have taken a dislike to our band and to me. This is another one. I have worked as an activist for all my adult life, and I think overall that no one can doubt we have been pretty effective. You can criticise me for a lot of things, but probably not for my commitment of time and energy to this. I think some of the people who criticise us in Ireland and America have a history that you can trace back to our opposition to Noraid. A lot of the others probably hate our music. And a lot of other people probably have a point...

I once met a guy who, when a man from Oxfam had knocked on his door, listened to all the issues and at the end of the meeting handed over to him his house and all of his money and became a monk...

[Laughs.] If I did that they would be waiting outside that monastery with a donkey and some palm leaves and prepare me for the crucifixion.

From that extreme I guess we all have to make decisions about those issues. How in conscience do you square your wealth with the poverty you see around you here? Do you feel obliged to give more than time and energy?

That is a deal you make with your God and your missus as far as I am concerned. You are talking about private giving - tithing. I am driven by some scriptural ideas on that subject, on alms: let not the left hand know what the right hand does. I also understand that there are times you have

to be public and upfront about it, when you are looking for matching funding, say. You know as a band we give I think 10,000 young kids music lessons. Our contribution to RED was about \$11m or \$12m [from last year's tour]. As regards inequality and how does one feel, you know that the people in the slums three miles from here see absolutely no difference between you and me. You have hot water and holidays and good food and a nice car and so do I. There might be people who would say we should all give all our money away. But you do not end poverty by alms. It is a structural thing. You know I am quite often in a pub in wherever, and put up against a wall by people who have quite simplistic ideas about how to end poverty. And I listen, and then I try to get on with what I do.

Do you ever think about walking away from this work, and concentrating on being a rock star?

No. Of course, it frustrates me sometimes. The people you would like to nurture it and to feel a part of it who stay on the sidelines... You know, when we started to talk about debt cancellation, some people were, you know, fuck off with your posturing. Now they are entitled to that view of course. But then according to the World Bank, who have no vested interest, we have 52 million more children in schools in Africa as a direct result of the money freed up by Drop the Debt. The applause for that should of course go to the African leaders who decided to spend that money wisely on the education of their young people. We aren't looking for applause. In the end it's 52 million more kids in schools. The millions of lives saved by the supply of antiretrovirals. The fact that the number of people in extreme poverty in 10 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including this one, has been halved in the past decade... That is what keeps us going...

● This article was corrected on Monday 23 September 2013 because a question in the interview stated that U2 offshore their income in the Dutch Antilles to avoid tax.

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