



Lumping Oxfam and aid together

The recent revelations about the behaviour of certain Oxfam employees while on aid missions, most notably in Haiti, were significant, and the behaviour deserves censure.

Part of the fallout has been a more general analysis of how predatory men can exploit the nature of emergency aid, ping-ponging around the world on six month contracts in the wake of natural catastrophes, to have indiscriminate and probably non-consensual sex with people who are under their control, and get away with it. By the time someone questions their behaviour, they are halfway around the world in another country. This level of wider analysis is absolutely appropriate and necessary.

Yet the attacks on Oxfam haven't stopped there. One attack involved wasteful spending on marketing campaigns; another on the fact that senior positions tended to be filled by men; another on the salary of the chief executive.

All of these issues are worth examination, but all are unconnected with the use of prostitutes in Haiti. What happens in cases like this is that issues snowball until you are faced with an avalanche of negativity that renders sensible analysis almost impossible.

And once the avalanche is rolling down the mountain, it is quite a short step to throwing into the mix,

"And our government spends too much on foreign aid as it is. Let's save billions and give it to the NHS."

Foreign aid is one of those issues where people who are opposed to something will use any kind of weapon to strike at it.

In this case, the appalling behaviour of certain employees in Haiti (and, to be fair, a structural problem around that particular issue) may give a fig-leaf of moral justification for ending the British government's commitment to spending 0.7% on the poorest people in the world. And remember, this spend is almost entirely in countries that our Empire happily exploited for over a century, for the benefit of the UK, and also fostering the poverty in the Third World which we are now seeking to help eradicate.

I don't always approve of the way that aid is spent but it seems to me that all spend that helps, to give just three examples, Rohingya Muslims fleeing genocide, Yemeni children with cholera because of the part-civil war part-fight with Saudi Arabia, or people recovering after the earthquake in Iraq has got to be worth it.

If we spend £160 billion on pensions, £40 billion on defence, and £30 billion on transport, is it really worth going after the £12 billion that gets spent on the poorest people on the planet (albeit that some of that is wasted)? If that's the case you want to make, I may disagree, but I will listen respectfully. I won't acknowledge that the behaviour of the Oxfam employees in Haiti is relevant in any way.

February 2018. for the Train is a short column written by the Reverend Robert Stanier, the vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train, or elsewhere. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at