

# The political agenda behind the UK ruling elite's attack on Oxfam

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The UK government cut off its aid budget to the Oxfam charity, amid a two-week media frenzy over alleged sexual misconduct by some of its staff in Haiti.

The attack on Oxfam was followed by the resignation of UNICEF deputy executive director Justin Forsyth, following accusations of inappropriate behaviour toward female aid workers during his time as chief executive of Save the Children. Forsyth admitted sending inappropriate texts and made comments to female staff about their appearance in 2011 and 2015.

At the same time Brendan Cox, widower of murdered Labour MP Jo Cox, resigned from charities set up in his wife's memory following allegations of sexual harassment while he worked at Save the Children. Forsyth and Cox worked together at 10 Downing Street when Gordon Brown was Labour prime minister from 2007 to 2010.

The moves against Oxfam began when the *Times*, owned by billionaire oligarch Rupert Murdoch, reported in a front-page article that four Oxfam aid workers had been sacked and three had resigned following an internal inquiry into alleged sexual exploitation, downloading pornography, bullying and intimidation. These were alleged to have occurred during the relief operation after the Haiti earthquake in 2010.

The media widely reported that Oxfam gave a reference to an alleged perpetrator, though it later transpired that it was written by an employee who had himself been dismissed. The campaign went into overdrive with claims made that Oxfam staff on its mission to Chad also used prostitutes in 2006. The *Sunday Times* reported that more than 120 workers from UK charities were alleged to have committed sexual abuse in the past year.

Oxfam's own inquiry concluded there was a "culture of impunity" among some staff in Haiti. Oxfam allowed country director in Haiti, Roland Van Hauwermeiren, to resign after he admitted using prostitutes in his home in

Haiti.

In 2011, Oxfam informed the charities watchdog, the Charities Commission, of its investigation. It would seem that the commission was indifferent to any possible abuse at the time, as it did not even request a copy of the findings.

However, seven years later, the commission has lambasted Oxfam for not disclosing the "full details" and making "no mention of potential sexual crimes involving minors." The commission cynically declared, "Our approach to this matter would have been different had the full details ... been disclosed to us at the time."

Penny Mordaunt, secretary of state for the Department for International Development (DfID), followed suit, declaring on the BBC's "Andrew Marr" show that Oxfam had failed in its "moral leadership" and did "absolutely the wrong thing" by not disclosing all the details.

The immediate fallout of the "revelations" was the resignation of Oxfam's deputy chief executive Penny Lawrence. Then DfID, which awarded contracts worth £31.7 million to Oxfam last year, announced that it was stopping future finance until the charity could fulfil the "high standards" government ministers expect. The Haitian government temporarily revoked Oxfam's authorisation to work on the island.

No one can take at face value the claims of the government and its right-wing media backers to be concerned with the welfare of young women in disaster zones.

The campaign by the government and its right-wing media backers is aimed at bringing Oxfam to its knees. Newspapers including the *Daily Mail* trumpeted on their front pages the fact that Oxfam's chief executive, Mark Goldring, disclosed that 7,000 direct debits out of more than 30,000 personal donations had already been cancelled.

Goldring's initial response was an angry retort to Oxfam's critics, whom he decried as disproportionate and "gunning" for his organization "which had not murdered babies in their cots." Many of those targeting Oxfam, on the other hand, do indeed have blood on their hands having supported the wars and so-called "structural adjustment" programmes that have destroyed entire countries and continents.

While Oxfam itself—like other anti-poverty charities—is the beneficiary of countless hours of voluntary work in Britain by people deeply opposed to poverty both at home and abroad, it too operates overseas as a major corporation carrying out multimillion government contracts, with offices alongside the banks and global financial consultants.

Goldring later apologised to the International Development parliamentary committee for his remarks and offered "humblest apologies" to the Haitian government. Oxfam issued a full-page apology in the *Guardian* over events that took place seven years ago for which no one was arrested, let alone charged.

The *New Statesman* noted that if Mordaunt were to cut all government funding to Oxfam, as threatened, it "would definitely notice. Of its £409 million income last year, 7 percent came from the UK government. That's in comparison to donations and legacies which accounted for 26 percent of funding and trading sales which make up just over a fifth."

It is necessary to stand back from the screaming headlines and make a sober appraisal of the timing and targeting of this unprecedented attack on Oxfam, alongside the forces involved and their motives. As with the #MeToo campaign, its purpose is to engineer political shifts of a reactionary character.

Part of Oxfam's popularity is its detailed annual reports showing that capitalism is an increasingly irrational system, in which a tiny minority of the obscenely wealthy expropriate the wealth created by the labour of billions, the vast numbers of whom are condemned to live in abject poverty.

Last January's report was particularly damning. As well as citing the growing inequality, it pointed out that "the key factors driving up rewards for shareholders and corporate bosses at the expense of workers' pay and conditions ... include the erosion of workers' rights; the excessive influence of big business over government policy-making; and the relentless corporate drive to minimize costs in order to maximize returns to shareholders."

It was immediately after this that the campaign against Oxfam began, with government ministers attacking the charity for being too "political" and demanding that it be brought to heel.

The offensive demonstrates that even Oxfam's mild criticisms and palliatives can no longer be tolerated. It is bound up with the concerted shift by the ruling elite to militarism and war, and away from the "soft power" tools—including the various charities it used in the past to push through its geopolitical interests.

While the ruling class has long perpetuated the myth that foreign aid is spent on alleviating poverty and mitigating the consequences of war, the reality is that most of the UK government's £13.4 billion aid budget, 0.7 percent of GDP, is spent securing Britain's commercial and geostrategic interests.

Much aid has now been "securitised," with aid money used to prevent migration from Africa and the Middle East, and to provide security, meaning military, and police operations and training, channelled through a handful of corporations.

Last year, the BBC exposed how a multimillion-pound foreign aid project, ostensibly aimed at training a civilian police force in rebel-held Aleppo, Idlib and Daraa provinces in Syria, ended up in the hands of jihadi groups. The UK government, after briefly suspending the project, soon resumed its funding.

The most rapacious sections of the ruling elite, including those in the "hard Brexit" faction, are now demanding the slashing or ending of the foreign aid budget, with senior military and government figures calling ever more stridently for a substantial increase in military spending.

As part of the offensive against Oxfam, party leadership contender and hard Brexiteer Jacob Rees-Mogg delivered a petition to Downing Street—supported by the right-wing *Daily Express*—which demanded a "crusade" to "Stop the foreign aid madness." The *Sun*, also owned by Murdoch, editorialised that the "Government must strip Oxfam's cash ... and ditch [the] foreign aid spending target."



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