

# The question Andrew Mitchell must answer (and it's not about 'pleb-gate')

## A comment on restoring UK aid to Rwanda

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This week's Conservative Party Conference revived debate over whether Andrew Mitchell should lose his position as Chief Whip after verbally abusing a police officer on duty at 10 Downing Street and allegedly calling him a 'pleb'. But, as the debate over whether he should resign his current position rumbles on, there is another question that Mr Mitchell must answer related not to his actions in his new position but to his final day in his old one.

Mitchell's last act as Secretary of State for International Development and head of the UK Department for International Development (DFID) was to restore UK aid to Rwanda. He had previously suspended aid in July, in line with other key donors to Rwanda, following allegations by a UN Group of Experts that Rwanda is covertly supporting a violent rebel group in neighbouring DR Congo.

To understand Mitchell's decision to resume aid we need to appreciate how the UK came to have such strong links with this small east African state, to the extent that he would risk UK isolation and attract criticism from the UN, EU and human rights groups such as Amnesty International, as well as a range of UK newspapers, including the Telegraph, Independent, Times, Guardian and Daily Mail.

Since the 1994 Rwandan genocide the UK has become an important bilateral aid partner to the country, currently giving over £80 million in aid annually with half of this direct to the Government of President Paul Kagame. Under Labour, from 1997, Clare Short cemented the relationship with Rwanda and positioned the UK as a 'critical friend' and supporter of Kagame. She advocated for continued UK support to Rwanda after Kagame's army intervened in DR Congo in 1996 to tackle genocidal forces. This invasion exacerbated a civil war whose effects are still ongoing in the East of the country, with over 4 million killed, successive waves of displacement and widespread sexual violence.

Labour may have initiated strong UK-Rwanda relations, but under the Conservative Party Rwanda has continued to enjoy high levels of financial and diplomatic support from the UK. It was amongst 27 states (out of 43) whose UK aid survived a bilateral aid review commissioned by Mitchell in 2011. This is perhaps because Conservative-Rwanda relations began even prior to David Cameron's 2010 election victory.

Since 2007 Conservative MPs have taken part annually in Project Umubano, a Summer visit to Rwanda incorporating social reconstruction activities such as teaching English, building schools and coaching football. Andrew Mitchell spearheaded this project prior to becoming Head of DFID and maintained it while in office. David Cameron has also championed the project, and has praised Kagame's achievements in bringing stability and rapid development to a shattered post-genocide state. The 'Big Society' promoted by Cameron's government also echoes Rwanda's programme of public involvement in community work and reconstruction, Umuganda, praised by Conservatives. During their visits both men have spoken of their great admiration for Rwanda's achievements.

Mitchell and Cameron are far from alone in their admiration for Rwanda's post-genocide recovery. Kagame's regime has proved effective in implementing economic reforms, promoting private investment and demonstrating 'zero-tolerance' on corruption. DFID's 2008 Country Plan for Rwanda described Rwanda's progress since 1994 as 'remarkable', commenting favourably on the Government's strong leadership and highlighting decreasing poverty rates (from 70 to 54 per cent of population) and average economic growth of 6.4 per cent per year.

However human rights groups and critics highlight a lack of political opposition and the silencing of dissent within Rwanda, and links between the Rwandan regime and rebel groups in DR Congo since 1996, as evidence of a regime that is authoritarian at home and destabilizing in the region. Earlier this year members of UK police visited Rwandan dissidents living in the UK to warn them of a possible threat of assassination by hitmen sent by the Rwandan regime. In many ways the recent allegations of Rwandan involvement in DR Congo, this time through their support for the 'M23' rebel group, feel like déjà vu. But the cutting of aid to Rwanda by the Netherlands, Sweden and the US (Canada also withdrew from Rwanda in 2009) and rising anti-Kagame sentiment at the UN and EU, suggests this row may not blow over as quickly as in previous instances.

In the UK, an unprecedented level of scrutiny is now being placed on the decision by Mitchell to restore aid to Rwanda. The contention put forward by the Sunday Telegraph's Jason Lewis is that this directly reflects Mitchell's personal ties to Rwanda (07.10.12), in defiance of advice from colleagues in the Foreign Office, signaling continuation of UK faith in Kagame's government that began under Labour. Mitchell, however, remains silent on the issue. This is perhaps due to fear that a public appearance to explain his decision could provoke further 'pleb-gate' scrutiny, or perhaps it hides the fact there is no good explanation which is defensible to the UK public or parliament.

To restore aid as a last act in office will seem to many reminiscent of US Presidents signing controversial death row pardons before leaving office, hoping to avoid political fallout of their actions. But this is an act with significant consequences, the UK is increasingly isolated internationally in its support for Rwanda and Kagame, with representatives from the UN, EU and other donors arguing that supporting Kagame is not compatible with enhancing security and democracy in Africa. Mitchell's Cabinet colleague, the new Secretary of State Justine Greening has also been left in the difficult position of having to justify the UK position, with no evidence that the reasons for suspending aid in the first place have been resolved.

The question that must be answered is therefore this: on what basis did Andrew Mitchell make the decision to restore UK aid to Rwanda? Did it reflect personal ties to and confidence in Kagame, some aspect of UK national interest (though opposition to the decision from the Foreign Office would seem to rule this out), or does he have reasons based on information that the UK public, and those who continue their aid suspensions, are not privy to? In short, Mr Mitchell needs to explain himself.

Whilst many will continue to wait and see if the Chief Whip survives pleb-gate, the Rwanda aid debacle suggests that this verbal outburst is not the primary instance of poor judgment that should animate his critics.