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The British Prime Minister Is Clearly Pretending To Care About Gay Rights For The Votes

At the recent Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Australia, the United Kingdom's Prime Minister David Cameron announced that future development aid to Africa would be contingent on recognition of gay rights.

Laudable though his comments were, one wonders why Cameron chose to highlight gay rights, when so many other abuses of human and economic rights are rife in Africa. We suspect Cameron was playing to a domestic audience, and just maybe he didn't want to acknowledge that for so many years UK aid transfers have aided and abetted wider systemic abuses.

Cameron has annoyed many African leaders and political commentators with his pro-gay stance. This is to be expected on a continent where so many view homosexuality as an abhorrent western import. Many African leaders inhabit a world that automatically assumes bigotry is always and everywhere perpetrated against them, rather than by them. But there is no escaping the fact that in almost all African countries homosexuality is illegal. For simply being true to themselves, gays and lesbians face the threat of imprisonment and punishment by their own governments. In addition they often suffer routine threats of violence and abuse from the general population, media and religious leaders.

More from GlobalPost: Uganda: Fury at threat to cut aid over gay rights [2]

But while a minority of Africans face these abuses, the vast majority of Africans face many other abuses every day. Had Cameron studied the latest Economic Freedom of the World report produced by the Cato Institute he would have noticed that while some economies, such as Kenya and Zambia, have made progress toward more freedom, almost all African economies are unfree. This means that official government policies and heavy handed bureaucracies routinely deny individuals rights to own property, to start businesses, trade domestically and across borders, and retain their hard earned money.

According to Freedom House, only five sub-Saharan African countries have a free press. Twenty one are partly free and 22 are not free. Legal provisions and harassment of journalists mean that the freedom of expression that most people in the West take for granted is absent in large parts of Africa. Without these freedoms abusive governments are better able to sustain their repression, including against gay Africans.

For years the UK taxpayer has directly funded dozens of African governments that would score poorly on any measure of freedom, including gay rights. Even though these transfers may be intended for a specific use, such as health systems, they are usually made directly to the government coffers. All aid is fungible, so the UK has actually paid to perpetuate policies that frustrate economic and press freedoms, thereby keeping people locked in poverty.

More from GlobalPost: Zimbabwe: Tsvangirai comes out in favor of gay rights [3]

In some cases the UK government has continued to fund governments that it knows are guilty of human rights abuses. Take Rwanda for instance, which has performed well economically recently but is becoming increasingly autocratic. In May of this year the British police warned Rwandan exiles living in the UK that they were in danger from Rwandan President Kagame's government, which had sent agents to Britain to threaten and possibly murder Kagame's enemies.

For the police to take this action, the evidence must be credible that Rwandan government agents were in the UK to commit crimes, so one might expect the Cameron government to withhold funding from President Kagame's regime. Far from it. The Cameron government continued to commit \$530 million over five years to Rwanda, most of it directly to the Kagame government coffers. Who can guess how much of that will be spent sending agents back to the UK on illegal operations?

Several African leaders and commentators, including those of Ghana, Uganda and Nigeria, have been so outraged by Cameron's gay rights appeal that they have indeed suggested that the UK halt all aid transfers. We hope the Cameron government immediately calls their bluff.

More from GlobalPost: Rainbow Planet: The worldwide struggle for gay rights [4]

Halting aid would help to push these governments to become more self-sufficient and enact policy reforms that would grow their economies, lifting all sectors of society out of poverty. It would also save UK's hard hit taxpayers hundreds of millions of pounds at a time of massive budget deficits and economic austerity.

If the Cameron government really cares about the fate of gay and lesbian Africans, they could relax immigration requirements to allow them to claim asylum more easily.

Sub-Saharan Africa will not reach the levels of prosperity that the UK enjoys with donor aid. Domestic policy reforms that increase levels of economic freedom, such as those enacted by Mauritius and enjoyed by Botswana, are the key to growth. And ultimately a more prosperous Africa is likely to become more tolerant and accepting of gays and lesbians.

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