PENNY HOURDAUNT, MP
International Development Secretary

AM: Can I ask you first of all when you came across this story first?

PM: When The Times picked up the story.

AM: So you picked up The Times and that was the first you knew of it. What was your reaction?

PM: Well I think it’s a complete betrayal of both the people that Oxfam were there to help and also the people that sent them there to do that job. It’s a scandal.

AM: Let’s walk through aspects of this scandal bit by bit by bit. First of all Oxfam allowed the people responsible for this appalling behaviour in Haiti to leave relatively quietly, no hullaballoo and they weren’t fired, they were allowed to resign. What do you think of that?

PM: I think it’s shocking, and it doesn’t matter how good the safeguarding practices are in an organisation. If that organisation does not have the moral leadership to do the right thing and where in particular they have evidence of criminal activity to pass that information to the relevant authorities, including prosecuting authorities. That’s an absolute absence of leadership.

AM: So you feel that Oxfam failed in its moral leadership?

PN: Yes, I do.
AM: Let’s move onto the second phase of all of this, because it’s really important to walk through it. Having let these people go, they then joined other aid organisations and charities and those organisations weren’t told about any of this. Again, what’s your reaction?

PM: That’s a scandal and that is why we must ensure that people are reporting these offences when they take place. We’ve got to give the sector the best chance it has at ensuring that people who are, we suspect, targeting this sector in order to carry out predatory activities, that we give them the best chance they can not to allow that to happen.

AM: When are you going to meet Oxfam and have the conversation face to face?

PM: Well I’m meeting them tomorrow and I’m affording them the opportunity to tell me in person what they did after these events and I’m going to be looking to see if they are displaying the moral leadership that I think they need to now. We’re talking about an historic case but it is in some respects still live. They still have information they should be giving to the authorities.

AM: In terms of your department back when all of this happened in 2011 what were you told as a department by Oxfam?

PM: We were not told about the nature of these events. They initially said that they were investigating misconduct and when they concluded that report they did not tell us the nature of these events. They did tell the Charity Commission that there was sexual inappropriate behaviour, bullying and harassment of employees but they did not report that to us.

AM: Given that you knew there was a problem was that not at the very least a little incurious of your department not to ask more?
PM: No, because in addition to that Oxfam also gave us reassurances of the two things that are critical to us. It’s about – if you just let me finish – it’s about was there any harm done and was there any involvement of the beneficiaries of aid involved? Was there any impact on them and they told us categorically no and they also told us there was no –

AM: That was a lie, wasn’t it?

PM: Well quite, and they also told us that there was no misappropriation of funds because obviously that is the other thing that we would have been concerned with. So –

AM: So this is beginning to sound like – beginning to look like a cover up and it’s certainly clear that they lied to you. Or you feel they lied to you. They get quite a lot of public money from you. Is there any part of you that’s beginning to think maybe we shouldn’t be paying tax payers’ money to this organisation?

PM: Yes, I do think that.

AM: You do?

PM: I think that I’m going to afford them the opportunity to talk to me tomorrow, but I’m very clear, it doesn’t matter whether you’ve got a whistle-blowing hotline, it doesn’t matter if you’ve got good safeguarding practices in place. If the moral leadership at the top of the organisation isn’t there then we cannot have you as a partner. I would also just note that there are enormous numbers of people who are doing good work and they’re good people working for Oxfam and they have been betrayed in this as well.

AM: Absolutely, but do you think there was a cover up to put it bluntly?
PM: I don’t know what their motivation was for behaving the way that they did and again I’m affording them the opportunity tomorrow to talk to me directly about that. But they did absolutely the wrong thing. They let individuals who had undertaken criminal activity, they let them go. They did not tell prosecution authorities, they did not tell their regulator and they did not tell their donors.

AM: What they will probably tell you tomorrow is that we’re doing very, very good work, very important work all around the world and we were worried that if people knew about this they would stop donating. That’s probably what they will say isn’t it?

PM: Well I think there’s some actions that I’m looking for them taking now. If they do not hand over all the information that they have from their investigation and subsequently to the relevant authorities, including the Charity Commission and prosecuting authorities then I cannot work with them anymore as an aid delivery partner.

AM: That’s the end of public money if they don’t do what you tell them?

PM: And any other organisation in those circumstances.

AM: So you would agree with Priti Patel who said, ‘UK aid should be withdrawn from this scandalous organisation’. You’re going to give them one last chance, one last meeting, but otherwise you agree with her?

PM: I need to look at the facts and I want to afford them the opportunity to tell me their side of the story so I have all the facts. But I’m very clear, we have got to – and the sector has to step up in terms of tackling what is an industry that is being targeted by individuals. It’s not just there are a few bad apples.
AM: By paedophiles in fact.

PM: Yes. They’re targeting this because of the chaos that we work in and we have to do everything to ensure that those people are spotted and that other organisations that might be potentially hiring them in the future do not.

AM: Exactly. You talk about the sector as a whole and we’ve been focusing very hard on Oxfam for obvious reasons. They have been a noble organisation for this company and they’re now in deep, deep trouble. But it’s not just them, is it? It’s Christian Aid of all people. It’s Save the Children, founded in Britain just after the First World War. So these are big, big British national institutions being disgraced around the world. Do you worry that the entire aid project, the kind of aid that we’re doing at the moment the way it’s being delivered is under threat because of what’s happened?

PM: I think that we need to do more. This is an issue. DFID has been leading the charge on this under my predecessors, through the UN, through getting reforms, through getting the oversight needed and we also – I’m writing out to all of the organisations we work with to ensure that the practices and the moral leadership is there.

AM: Are you going to call in Save the Children, Christian Aid and the British Red Cross, who are all mentioned in today’s papers as well?

PM: I will be looking at all of the organisations that we work with to ensure that both the practices and the leadership needed are in place. And I also think that we need to get the international community to step up. I’ll be making a speech later this week at
an international conference looking at child protection and raising these issues.

AM: You came into politics because you – I think it was Romanian orphanages you worked in originally. There’s an awful lot of people watching this programme you know good people who give money to these organisations and they’re going to be thinking, do you know what, maybe I shouldn’t after all. What’s your message to them?

PM: Aid does a huge amount of good. It does a huge amount of good around the world but it’s also good for the UK. It makes us more prosperous, it makes us more secure. We contribute towards global health security and many other aspects. Aid is good. But if we believe that, then we have to reassure donors. Whether they’re people donating voluntarily or whether it’s governments and the international community. We have to demonstrate that that money is not just being spent well but could not be spent better.

AM: Can I ask a little bit more about this very unhappy episode. Can we be clear that in future the use of prostitutes by any staff of NGOs crosses a line which will end government funding if it’s discovered?

PM: I think it’s more complicated than that because it’s not just about the incident that occurred. Many of the organisations we work with, for example work with local staff in very complex situations, for me it is about what the organisation does a) to prevent that from happening and b) if it has –

AM: So it’s much better internal rules?

PM: - if it has a report given to it. What is so disturbing about Oxfam is that when this was reported to them they completely
failed to do the right thing and that’s what we need to focus on and that’s what will ultimately stop predatory individuals being able to take advantage of vulnerable people.

AM: You had Jacob Rees-Mogg going up to Number 10 with a big petition from Express readers against the entire aid budget project or a lot of it. Do you worry that this kind of thing makes your position as somebody who defends the aid budget in Cabinet as in your party much, much harder?

PM: I think we have to make the case for aid much better. What I have said is we need to have a higher spending bar. It cannot just be spent well; we have to demonstrate to people that it could not be spent better in the national interests. Whether that be in the NHS or social care. That is what we need to focus on. Ultimately aid alleviates pressures on the NHS. It alleviates pressures on our armed forces. It’s a sensible thing to do.

AM: Of course.

PM: But we cannot do it badly. The 0.7 is only a help if we spend it really well and that’s what we have to demonstrate.

AM: Are you clear finally that no British citizens were involved in illegal activities in the Oxfam or other cases and specifically that no British citizens were having sex with under aged people? Because that would be a criminal offence.

PM: It would be.

AM: In this country.

PM: Well, not just in this country. We are actually part of an international agreement which means that if you’re a British citizen no matter where you’re committing an offence it’s an offence
here. So this is not about the law needing to be strengthened, it’s about organisations reporting to prosecuting authorities so these people can be brought to –

AM: I was really just asking you about what information you had on this.

PM: Well I think this is an emerging picture. There are more allegations coming out about Oxfam and other organisations. I have written out to every organisation we work with asking them to place on the record all of the events historic or live, that they are aware of and any other safeguarding issues that they are aware of. And all of them Andrew will be followed up.

AM: Let’s move on if we may. There’s I think six major speeches by the Prime Minister and array of other Cabinet ministers on Brexit coming over the next week or two. What are we going to learn from these?

PM: Well I think what the public wants is they want the vision and they want some meat on the bones and that’s what they’re going to get and that will involve at the end of the process the Prime Minister setting out what that new partnership will look like, but it will also give some detail on our trading ambitions and relationship, on what it means for devolution and many other aspects.

AM: So for instance if you are a major company watching very, very worriedly this whole process. We had the Japanese Ambassador talking about Japanese companies simply pulling out if they don’t get the kind of tariff free access that they expect and want, they will get answers within the next couple of weeks?

PM: They will get some answers.
AM: At least from what we want to do, we won’t get the negotiations.

PM: Absolutely, that’s the key difference. So I’m afraid this is a negotiation, there will be -

AM; But at least they’ll know what our position is?

PM: Exactly and that I think is what business is looking for. We’ve got to give business, but other organisations as well a flavour of what they need to plan for and some certainty about what we’re looking for.

AM: And what perhaps they’re most concerned about right at the moment is the transition period. Do you think it’s a given that it’s going to happen at all?

PM: My personal view is I do because it’s on our interest and it’s in the EU’s interest. So I think common sense will prevail.

AM: Michel Barnier said it’s not a given and he’s laid down some very clear conditions and said if you don’t abide by those conditions during the transition period I have behind me a whole series of punishments that I can then impose upon you and you can saying about them. Do you think he’s being at the very least discourteous to this country?

PM: Well I would agree with what David Davis has said on that matter. But what I would say to the public is that actually the other nations involved in this are very pragmatic and have not been impressed with some of the language that the Commission has used. So ultimately this is about what’s good for us and what’s good for the remainder of the EU.
AM: And in terms of the rights of EU citizens coming here during the transition period, the Prime Minister’s been very, very clear that that changes. We’ve left the EU, it’s a new situation. Is that a red line for this country?

PM: Well it is what we are setting out in our position. Again, all of this is a negotiation but I know that the –

AM: Frankly up to now we fold on everything. We say this is a red line, we’re going to do it and then they say no, no no, this is what we – and then we fold and then things move on.

PM: Well we’re going to be setting out some more details about our position on all of these issues over the coming months but that is something that we are looking for. Ultimately it will be the negotiation, the phrase that’s trotted out, ‘nothing is decided till everything is decided.’ But I think that these things make sense and we’re right to ask for them.

AM: I don’t know if you had the chance to hear Anna Soubry with Chuka Umunna earlier on. Do you get the sense that this is driving the stresses and strains in your party now to breaking point?

PM: I don’t think that at all.

AM: There’s a surprise.

PM: The parliamentary party and the Cabinet are behind the Prime Minister. We are trying to get the best deal possible for the UK. I have great respect for both Chuka and Anna but we did have a referendum, we are leaving. Whichever way people voted we all have an interest in getting the best deal possible and that’s what we’re doing.
AM: And the last time we were talking, some way back now was actually during the referendum campaign, I don’t know if you remember it, but you were full of confidence and optimism about this. You and people like you never told us how hard it was going to be.

PM: Well I think no one thought it was going to be a walk in the park, but actually I think once you get past all the Westminster bubble and you look at actually what are the practical things that need to happen, what is ultimately good for us, for our security and prosperity and what is good for the remainder of the EU, for their security and prosperity, actually they’re the same things.

AM: you still remain chipper? Okay.

PM: I am. I am.

Ends