

'Inappropriate Behaviour' - Michael Fallon, Yemen, and the 'Mainstream' That Is Anything But

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The truth of corporate journalism, and the great irony of its obsession with 'fake news', is that it is itself utterly fake. What could be more obviously fake than the idea that Truth can be sold by billionaire-owned media dependent on billionaire-owned advertisers for maximised profit?

The 'mainstream' worldview is anything but – it is extreme, weird, a product of corporate conformity and deference to power. As Norman Mailer observed:

'There is an odour to any Press Headquarters that is unmistakeable... The unavoidable smell of flesh burning quietly and slowly in the service of a machine.' (Mailer, 'The Time Of Our Time', Little Brown, 1998, p.457)

A prime example of 'mainstream' extremism is the way the UK's illegal wars destroying whole countries are not an issue for corporate moralists. Physicians for Global Responsibility [estimate](#) that 1.3 million people have been killed in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan alone. And yet it is simply understood that UK wars will not be a theme during general elections (See [here](#) and [here](#)). By contrast, other kinds of 'inappropriate behaviour' are subject to intense scrutiny.

Consider the recent resignation of Defence Secretary Michael Fallon and his replacement by Prime Minister Theresa May's Chief Whip, Gavin Williamson. Fallon resigned after it was [revealed](#) that he had 'repeatedly touched the broadcaster Julia Hartley-Brewer's knee at a dinner in 2002'.

Fallon was damaged further by [revelations](#) that he had lunged at journalist Jane Merrick:

'This was not a farewell peck on the cheek, but a direct lunge at my lips.'

The Commons leader Andrea Leadsom also [disclosed](#) that she had complained about 'lewd remarks' Fallon had made to her.

Sexual harassment *is* a serious issue, despite the scoffing of some male commentators. In the Mail on Sunday, Peter Hitchens shamefully [dismissed](#) women's complaints as mere 'squawking'.

But it is strange indeed that, while harassment is rightly deemed a resigning offence, other

‘inappropriate behaviour’ leaves ‘mainstream’ commentators completely unmoved.

Fallon [voted](#) for both the 2003 war that destroyed Iraq and the 2011 war that wrecked Libya. He voted for war on Syria. He voted for replacing the Trident nuclear missile system. Earlier this year, he even [declared](#) that Britain would be willing to launch a nuclear first strike.

After he was made Secretary of Defence in July 2014, Fallon oversaw the supply of weapons to Saudi Arabia waging war on Yemen. Two years later, Campaign Against Arms Trade [reported](#) that UK sales to Saudi Arabia since the start of the war included £2.2 billion of aircraft, helicopters and drones, £1.1 billion of missiles, bombs and grenades, and nearly half a million pounds’ worth of tanks and other armoured vehicles. British sales of military equipment to the kingdom [topped](#) £1.1bn in the first half of this year alone.

In December 2016, Fallon [admitted](#) that internationally banned cluster munitions supplied by the UK had been used in Saudi Arabia’s bombing campaign. Six months earlier, Amnesty International had [reported](#) that British-made cluster bombs were being used in attacks on civilians that had claimed the lives of children. For none of these horrors did Fallon resign.

So what kind of conflict are these weapons fuelling? The Guardian [reports](#) this week:

‘Yemen is in the grip of the world’s worst cholera outbreak and 7 million people are already on the brink of famine.’

In July, Reliefweb [reported](#):

‘The scale of the food crisis in conflict-ridden Yemen is staggering with 17 million people – two thirds of the population – severely food insecure and seven million of these on the verge of famine.’

Director-General of the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organisation, José Graziano da Silva, has described Yemen as the UN’s ‘largest humanitarian crisis today’, noting that conflict and violence have disrupted agriculture, with violence intensifying in areas most short of food. In December 2016, a study by UNICEF, the UN children’s agency, [found](#) that at least one child was dying in Yemen every 10 minutes. The agency found that, since 2014, there had been a 200 per cent increase in children suffering from severe acute malnutrition, with almost half a million affected. Nearly 2.2 million children were in need of urgent care.

This week, the Saudi-led coalition declared it would close Yemen’s borders to prevent an alleged flow of weapons from Iran, after it intercepted a missile attack by Houthi rebels near Riyadh, the Saudi capital. Johan Mooij, Yemen director of Care International, [commented](#):

‘For the last two days, nothing has got in or out of the country. Fuel prices have gone up by 50% and there are queues at the gas stations. People fear no more fuel will come into Hodeidah port.’

He added:

‘People depend on the humanitarian aid and part of the cholera issue [is] that they do not eat and are not strong enough to deal with unclean water.’

There have been ‘daily airstrikes in Sana’a,’ Mooij said, adding: ‘People fear the situation is escalating.’

On Monday, the UN’s World Food Program [said](#) that, out of Yemen’s entire population of 28 million people, about 20 million, ‘do not know where they’re going to get their next meal’. These are Fallon’s millions, May’s millions, the ‘mainstream’s’ millions.

In the Independent, Mary Dejevsky made the only [mention](#) of Yemen in an article discussing Fallon’s resignation that we have seen in the national corporate press:

‘In the Middle East [on Fallon’s watch], the UK made great efforts to maintain its alliance with Saudi Arabia – and the arms sales that went with it – playing down the desperate plight of Yemen which was a by-product of this policy.’

Mass death, Iraq and Libya destroyed, millions of lives torn apart, profiteering in the billions from the torture of an impoverished, famine-stricken nation – none of this was deemed worthy even of mention in considering the record of Fallon and his ‘inappropriate behaviour’.

As for his replacement, the Guardian’s Andrew Sparrow tweeted a link to his [blog piece](#) titled: ‘10 things you might not know about Gavin Williamson’. Vital facts included news that the new Defence Secretary ‘kept a pet tarantula called Cronus on his desk’, ‘likes hedgehogs’, ‘is only 41’, and ‘went to a comprehensive school’.

Sparrow was adhering to the journalistic convention that parliamentary politics should be depicted as a light-hearted, Wodehousian farce. It is all a bit of a laugh – everybody means well. Despite Williamson’s lethal new role, the word ‘war’ was not mentioned.

Preoccupied with spiders and hedgehogs, Sparrow found no space to mention that Williamson ‘almost always [voted](#) for use of UK military forces in combat operations overseas’. He voted for war in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. He voted *against* the [Yemen motion](#) put before the House of Commons in October 2016 that merely called on the Government to suspend its support for the Saudi Arabia-led coalition forces in Yemen until it had been determined whether they had been responsible for war crimes. The motion was [defeated](#) by 283 votes to 193, telling us everything we need to know about the ‘mainstream’s’ much-loved myth that British policy is motivated by a ‘responsibility to protect’.

The BBC’s political editor Laura Kuenssberg tweeted a link to the BBC’s own comedy [profile](#), which also discussed the tarantula and other nonsense, and made no mention of Williamson’s record on war. We [asked](#) Kuenssberg:

‘Will you be asking him if he has any regrets on voting against the Yemen motion to suspend arms sales to Saudi Arabia, given the vast civilian crisis?’

We received no reply.

The extreme cognitive dissonance guiding 'mainstream' moral outrage was again highlighted by the Guardian columnist Gaby Hinsliff, who [tweeted](#):

'Can't help thinking that now would be quite a good time for the first ever female defence secretary, really'

We [asked](#):

'What difference would it make to the civilians dying under our bombs in Yemen and Syria? Isn't that the key issue on "defence"?''

Hinsliff did not reply. But the answer, of course, is that it would make no difference at all.

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