

[There's a lot of ruin in a nation](#) [1]

Written by [Tim Worstall](#) [2] | Saturday 1 November 2008



As Adam Smith pointed out, there's a lot of ruin in a nation....but not an inexhaustible amount, as he didn't go on to say. The latest story from Zimbabwe [horrifies me](#) [3]:

A cholera outbreak has claimed its first victim in Zimbabwe's capital after causing death and illness elsewhere in a country too poor to provide clean water or clear garbage from the streets. Health authorities reported the death in Harare Thursday and said 20 other people had been hospitalized. Across the country in recent weeks, at least 27 people have died from cholera, mostly in impoverished districts, and hundreds have been treated for the highly infectious intestinal disease spread by contaminated food and water.

We know very well what is needed to beat cholera: a potable water system and a sewage system. They're the basics of any system of public health. That Zimbabwe has now sunk so low that they don't even have that is an example of the way in which government can screw up.

We sometimes get derided here for being anti-state, anti-government, and the sad thing about such criticism is that it simply isn't true. We're all in favour of the State and governments: provided they are kept in their place. There are some things which have to be done and which can only be done by government: public health measures being one of them. No, it doesn't mean that the Zimbabwean government has to provide, directly, sewage and water services, but they do need to ensure that they are provided. Just as such a government needs to provide a legal system, secure property rights and so on.

Without providing them, but still insisting upon being the government, they would be nothing more than bandits preying upon the population: you might think that to be already true of what is happening in that country but I couldn't possibly comment.

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