



GOVERNMENT OF BARBADOS

ADDRESS BY
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PRIME MINISTER
OF BARBADOS

IN COMMEMORATION OF THE 200TH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE ABOLITION OF
THE TRANS-ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

HOLY TRINITY CHURCH

HULL

ENGLAND

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I knew two of my great grandmothers, both of whom were born in the third quarter of the nineteenth century.

They knew, and spoke to us about their grandparents.

They were born as slaves.

Despite the passage of two hundred years, there is still an intimacy and an immediacy about the experience of slavery that time has yet to assuage.

It is therefore with a very profound sense of history and all of its obligations that I accept the invitation to address you today on the occasion of the celebration of this significant anniversary of one of mankind's most outstanding achievements.

I speak to you, not in my own name and my own right as an individual, but as part of a great process of liberation which has seen the great, great grandchildren of slaves take their place, rightfully so, among the leaders of the modern world.

In a very special way I feel the presence in this Hall of the spirits of the martyrs who died for our liberation.

I am even more honoured by the invitation to deliver a lecture in commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade, here in Holy Trinity Church where that celebrated son of Hull, William Wilberforce, was baptized.

It was a unique privilege for me to open the beautifully refurbished Wilberforce House Museum earlier today and to share in the pride of all Hull, and indeed of all Britain, in the outstanding achievements of William Wilberforce.

It is only fitting, therefore, that in paying tribute to the courage, determination and moral vision of William Wilberforce, we look not only backwards, for we can never forget, but cast our minds forward to honour the love of freedom bequeathed to us by one of the most influential persons in British political history.

I therefore propose to use this occasion to make some modest suggestions for rebuilding a partnership between the Caribbean and the United Kingdom in the same spirit of reconciliation, healing and social justice with which we commemorate both the life of William Wilberforce and the abolition of the slave trade.

Slavery and other forms of human bondage have unfortunately been an integral part of human economic and technological development from the dawn of history.

The trans-Atlantic slave trade and black slavery, however, are unique for a number of reasons.

They were a ghastly enterprise on a massive scale never seen before. They drew Europe, Africa and the Americas into a triangular relationship that was as enormously beneficial to a minority as it was devastating to the majority.

The brutality of African slavery in the Caribbean was infamous, and led to racist forms of oppression, the debilitating effects of which still infest our societies. It was truly a crime against humanity.

On a more positive note, the struggle against slavery brought out the best in those, enslaved and free, who opposed and eventually defeated it, and inspired future generations to commit themselves to the cause of human freedom. For, it was the African holocaust, followed by the Jewish holocaust at the hands of the Nazis in the 20th century, which was to inspire the international community to dedicate itself to the proclamation and pursuit of universal human rights today.

The facts of the slave trade and slavery are well known, but are worth repeating on this occasion.

In the course of some 400 years, over 12 million Africans were transported to the Americas in inhuman conditions and there enslaved. Some three million died in the course of this notorious Middle Passage and millions more failed to survive the savage conditions of slavery.

Forced migration on this massive scale had lasting deleterious consequences for the continent of Africa itself.

The victims of the slave trade were the young and healthy; thus cheating Africa of this valuable and productive human resource. Because of this, the population stagnated and those who remained were either too old to reproduce or too young to start. The economy of the continent went into decline as its main export became human beings. It is yet to properly recover.

Agriculture degenerated because the strong and able-bodied persons were not there to work the land or reap its rewards.

Social organization was disrupted and values were eroded. Ruling elites were corrupted. Almost every offence was punishable by sale to a slave-dealer, and

when the supply of criminals was exhausted, they resorted to kidnapping and instigating wars among peoples.

For those Africans who were transported to the Caribbean and the Americas their destiny was unimaginable suffering.

From the perspective of a kidnapped African such as Olaudah Equiano, the son of a chief who was brought to Barbados on a slave ship, the experience of the Middle Passage and enslavement was one unending succession of nightmarish horrors. His sensational and influential book, **The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa** published in London in 1789, is replete with graphic detail of horrible scenes of brutality, including the repeated sexual abuse of African women.

The slave trade also gave rise to an immense triangular trade that provided human and economic links between the continents of Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Before its life cycle was over, this gigantic system had become organized and self-sustaining. In its economic dimension, the slave trade was the first example of a modern integrated and inter-dependent economic system. It led to the creation of the sugar plantation system, and stimulated the development of the Industrial

Revolution and the rise of European colonial empires in the Western Hemisphere. It helped especially to underwrite a substantial part of the material development these countries, over the centuries, have come to enjoy.

Through its ruthless efficiency, the trans-Atlantic slave trade provided an incomparable model for modern global economic enterprises. It was in effect the first modern trans-national trade system, with a corporate organizational framework which featured a number of linkages.

We need, as we reflect, to also remind ourselves that the slave trade and slavery called the law into use in support of injustice and inhumanity. To begin with, this furious economic exploitation was regulated by an over-arching legal framework which defined Africans as a species of property. Indeed, for nearly 400 years Europeans devised a peculiar form of jurisprudence for the governance of the black humanity of Africa.

Enslaved persons were considered in law as things, rather than as persons, and could be bought and sold as chattel. Plantation slaves were attached to the soil and could only be sold with the estate. The status of a slave was transmitted by birth through the mother. In Guiana, where there were bands of runaway slaves, extra-

legal and illegal punishments were privately inflicted on the slaves not only by slave masters but as well by the judicial authorities implementing the law.

In the British colonies, slaves were not allowed to wander abroad without written passes and to carry a slave from his place of abode without the consent of his master was punishable by death. Slavery was for life, and manumission depended on the owner. Slave marriage was prohibited because it gave the slave comfort and security; and by law a slave could not enter into a contract or promise, consequently the marriage would be null and void. Furthermore, educating slaves was forbidden because masters believed that they would become knowledgeable about the wrongs of slavery and could stage a rebellion. British laws also forbade slaves from becoming Christians, stating that Christianity would lead to emancipation.

I have gone into this detail to reinforce the point that the slave trade, slavery and the slave laws constituted a triumvirate of exploitation, the likes of which had never been seen before.

At the centre of the slave trade in Europe was Britain. At the centre of the slave trade in the New World was the Caribbean. Slavery completely transformed the

Caribbean. For, unlike other parts of the world colonized by Europe, the Caribbean suffered the near total extermination of its indigenous peoples. Europeans then proceeded to construct new societies based upon the ideology of white supremacy and the infrastructure of African slavery. In the process, Caribbean societies lost their native social centre and came to be inhabited largely by European colonizers and enforced African migrants. A virulent racism, historically unfamiliar to African peoples in their indigenous setting, ordered these new societies.

If Britain was at the heart of the slave trade in Europe, Barbados was the linchpin of the slave trade in the Caribbean. From the outset, my homeland became a clearing house for the millions of enslaved Africans who were destined for other countries in the region.

During these centuries the slave trade became Barbados' pride and its shame. From 1627 to 1807 my country was a junior partner with Britain in this lucrative crime against humanity. The Barbadian slave-holding class made enormous profits. In 1627 when the Royal African Company received its charter from the British monarch to exercise the exclusive right to trade in enslaved persons from West Africa, Barbadians held five of the eight directorships of this monopoly company.

As the Trinidadian historian and former prime minister, Dr Eric Williams observed, “Barbados became the most precious jewel of the British Crown. In 1661 Charles II marked its importance by creating thirteen baronets in the island on the same day.”

The legacies of the slave trade and slavery are therefore legion. They include institutionalized retardation of national development in societies ravaged by slavery; modern day poverty and inequality; the brain drain from black communities; and the global marginalization of the young black male. But undoubtedly the most crippling legacy of the slave trade and slavery was racism. According to Dr Eric Williams, “Slavery was not born of racism but racism developed because of slavery”.

Whether or not the trans-Atlantic slave trade was initiated for economic reasons, it is undeniable that within 100 years of its inauguration, slavery in the Atlantic was associated exclusively with African phenotype and dark skin pigment.

And long after the abolition of slavery, racist forms of oppression – both legal and non-legal - of non-white peoples prevailed in the Caribbean, as well as in many other parts of the world, and most notoriously in the apartheid system of South

Africa. Racism in all its forms is the scourge of the modern world.

But at the heart of this moral darkness burns a light of freedom that did not go out. For slavery showed that the human body could be battered but the spirit could not be broken.

Enslaved Africans in the Caribbean and elsewhere struggled in myriad ways to maintain their human dignity and gain their freedom.

There were the well-known slave rebellions, the largest and best organized of which in Barbados occurred in 1816 and was led by a slave called Bussa whom my government has designated as one of the country's official National Heroes.

Historians have also documented the numerous forms of ingenious and courageous resistance to slavery that were common in all slave communities. Moreover slaves managed to create a whole world of their own within the interstices of the bleak slave economy and society. It was a world of social values remembered and recreated; a world of culture rich in artistic expression flourishing miraculously in the most barren conditions. Let us not forget that the greatest musical creation of the twentieth century, jazz, came out of the world the slaves made. So too did

calypso, reggae and numerous other art forms. Indeed our enslaved ancestors bequeathed to us an extraordinarily rich cultural heritage of which we in the Caribbean are immensely proud.

Of course, not only the enslaved fought for their freedom. They had many allies in free persons. In my own country we had the magnificent example of Sarah Ann Gill, a free black woman, who as a devout Methodist in the early 19th century followed her religion's call to fight against tyranny and oppression. Her unremitting struggle for the rights of the enslaved at great personal sacrifice caused her and her church to be persecuted remorselessly by the ruling slave-holding elite in Barbados. She too is among the pantheon of our National Heroes.

The history of Barbados since Emancipation has been a struggle to redress the evils of slavery. Constitutional independence in 1966 allowed us to hasten this process by creating policies to confront and eradicate the pernicious effects of slavery including racism, ghettoized housing, poverty and landlessness, and Eurocentric cultural and educational assumptions of superiority.

The policies of every single Barbadian government since independence have been informed by an implacable hostility to all forms of racial and ethnic discrimination

along with the highest respect for human rights both at home and abroad. This is our positive legacy from the evil of slavery.

I assure you we will continue to oppose all forms of bondage wherever they may be found.

And, of course, right here in Hull we have the example of the courageous role played by the incomparable parliamentary crusader, William Wilberforce, and his allies Thomas Clarkson and Granville Sharp.

Words cannot express my abiding admiration for the representative for Hull in the British Parliament. As I read Adam Hochschild's powerful account of the life and career of Wilberforce and his partnership with Thomas Clarkson, published a couple of years ago, I am amazed that your most distinguished parliamentarian could spend over twenty years in parliament, advancing a single cause: the abolition of the slave trade.

One might truly say, "Greater love hath no man than this, that he challenged and defeated the might of the British aristocracy, on behalf of his African brother."

Surely, in the annals of human history, there are fewer instances of the power of

altruism and magnanimity.

We are all therefore deeply indebted to William Wilberforce for his magnificent contribution to the abolition of the slave trade in 1807.

But there is still, after 200 years, unfinished business that must be dealt with.

It is to be noted that when slavery was abolished in 1833 over 20 million pounds was paid by the British government of the time to the Caribbean slave-holders as reparations for the loss of their property. Not a penny was paid to the former slaves.

Now I know that reparation, at least for the victims of the transatlantic slave trade and their descendants, has been a controversial issue. I suggest it need not be. It is a matter, not of retribution, but of morality. We need to bring equity to the emancipation process, and closure to the criminal activity that was racial chattel slavery.

I submit also that the cause being fought for reparation is not a mission of mendicancy. And it is not unknown as a practice over time.

During the 19th century, Europeans accepted and enforced multiple forms of reparations.

By ordinance of 17th April, 1825, the French Government recognized the Independence of Haiti on the condition that it agreed, inter alia, to pay reparations of 150 million gold francs. For the 97 years between 1825 and 1922 Haiti struggled to pay reparations; a drain of its resources that can help explain its present distressing circumstances.

The effects of 500 years of chattel slavery are still shaping the realities of black people the world over.

The principle of Reparations should be upheld, advocated and promoted through the establishment of a fund to facilitate material compensation to countries which were victimized, and by the pursuit of national and international policies to confront and eradicate the legacies of slavery.

For I conceive of reparations as a national and international responsibility.

Indeed the Government of Barbados, from the inception of universal adult suffrage

in 1950, and especially since independence in 1966, has accepted its duty of making national reparations through a wide variety of successive policies and programmes such as the provision of free education from primary to tertiary level, and the effective redistribution of land by the Tenancies Freehold Purchase Act of 1980.

It is now time that in the specific case of Britain and the Caribbean this historical injustice should be redressed. But it should be done, not in anger, but in a spirit of reconciliation, healing and social justice. Moreover, it should be done in a way that strengthens the lasting bonds of friendship between Britain and the Caribbean. Finally it should be done in a manner that both commemorates and is true to the spirit of William Wilberforce and all those who fought to end the slave trade and slavery.

It is against this background that I now share some thoughts on the spirit and substance of the new partnership of reconciliation and social justice that we should seek with the United Kingdom.

In the Caribbean we have always recognized that our struggle for liberation, and more recently development, were and are part of a world experience.

It is therefore impossible conceptually to disengage the forging of a new relationship with Britain from a discourse on the kind of global society, we should, together, be seeking to help create.

And this is where the lessons of the Wilberforce era matter most.

For one of the lessons we must draw from the fight which Wilberforce championed is that there is a place in public life and in public policy for idealism.

This evening, in Hull I say that as never before, there is a need for the expression and the practice of idealism in international affairs.

We are in danger of moving towards a more authoritarian world, one prone to arbitrariness; a human society governed not by a spirit of enlightenment, but one ordered by the strong.

The style and shape of international affairs are being crafted to make the world safe for the imposition of an extreme political dogma, bereft of any intellectual sustenance, and intended to advance the cause of the powerful by the clash of arms

rather than the clash of ideas.

The major problem of world poverty and international security are indeed conjoined. But this is not perceived by persons at the centre of global affairs who have diverted the attention and energy of the global community from carrying out the programme, agreed at international Summit after Summit, to achieve equitable global development, in favour of a fight against terrorism as a stand-alone activity.

We are also now living in a world where major policies are set to respond to the latest poll, and where the practice of “spin” rather than the full engagement of the intellect sets the boundaries within which progress is defined and sought.

Havel of the Czech Republic captured it well in the judgement that we live in a contaminated moral environment in which concepts such as love, friendship, compassion and humility have lost their depth and dimensions. For many, he said, these represent only psychological peculiarities; a little ridiculous in the era of computers and spaceships.

In addition, the maximization of shareholder values, material growth at the most rapid pace without regard for the environmental and ecological consequences, the

amassing of private fortunes that exceed the entire GDP of many economies, regrettably have become some of the predominant considerations that engross the energy of the world's principal actors.

The Caribbean and the United Kingdom cannot, acting alone, solve all of the world's problems. But given our shared values and strong traditions of respect for fairness and decency, we have a duty to find common cause on many of the matters which can make for a better world.

For instance, climate change is altering the way in which the Caribbean will have to engage with the world, and will affect the scope of any new partnership with Britain.

As societies whose economies have become increasingly dependent on our coastal resources, we welcome the strong leadership that the United Kingdom has brought to the fight against global warming and stand ready to do our part to make the global economy truly a Green Economy.

The Caribbean has also come closer to the ideal of the multi-racial society than any country in the modern world. Yet our efforts are incomplete as long as racism and

exploitation remain.

It is not too idealistic to dedicate ourselves to work together for the total elimination of racism.

It is also incumbent upon us to work together and with an unrelenting determination to assure the creation of a global trading system, that has the concept of equitable development at its core, that promotes not just free but also fair trade, and which fashions rules for trade based on the precept that as between equals equality, as between unequals, proportionality.

For international trade cannot become an instrument of Economic Emancipation unless the differences between different types of economies are respected and a place made for all, each in accordance to its circumstances.

There can be no one trade cap that fits all in today's world. Special and differential treatment for small, developing countries therefore becomes an essential prerequisite for the achievement of Economic Emancipation and development in our time.

The partnership that we seek is one in which this cause is not only promulgated by us, as a case of special pleading, but is accepted on the strength of its merits as a precept which should inform enlightened international relations.

The Caribbean also strongly supports the initiative, championed by the British Government, to work towards the substantial reduction of poverty in Africa as the most worthwhile single endeavour that should engage the attention of the global community now and for the foreseeable future – and wish to lend our support to its achievement.

The bilateral relationship between the United Kingdom and the Caribbean cannot be one that is frozen in a moment of history. It must also become one that is responsive to its own dynamic nature, is informed by an accurate perception and understanding of third party influences, and reflects a sustained effort to reconcile conflicts and interest, and a commitment to enter fair and equitable arrangements.

It cannot be truly said that the Caribbean has lacked attention from the United Kingdom.

Commissions were sent out in 1882 and again in 1896, and yet again in 1938 to

investigate the social and economic conditions of the then colonies, and to make recommendations for amelioration.

They led to a higher British profile, but no fundamental change in policy.

In time, Britain has come, in a manner, to disengage from the Caribbean through decolonization, and through its membership of the European Union. The trend indeed is towards the gradual multi-lateralisation of British policy in the Caribbean through the instruments and agencies of the European Union.

Indeed, the Maastricht Treaty of 1993, which set out the principles governing Europe's development policy, and which facilitates the emergence of a common European foreign and security policy, has come to shape in large measure British policy in the Caribbean since then.

We can, in such a context, be forgiven for entertaining the perception that Europe and hence the United Kingdom to some extent in its relationship with the Caribbean, would rather focus on security issues, migration, tax avoidance and money laundering, rather than development.

Valiant efforts have been made recently to shore up and modify Britain's relationship with the Caribbean through the Caribbean Forum, and the formation of the new Caribbean Advisory Group.

In some places, notably Barbados, there has been a surge inward of British investment, helping to stimulate the creation of new economic opportunities.

But it is equally beyond dispute, that, from a strategic point of view, as well as in relation to trade, aid and investment flows in general, the Caribbean has receded in both absolute and relative significance in its partnership relations with Britain.

Our region is seen as comprising a set of relatively high income developing countries which are unwilling to adjust.

We have also not yet developed the language and the techniques by which to operate in a world in which nations have to be given a reason to care and to be responsive.

It has also appeared to be the continuing policy of Britain to accommodate USA interests and wishes in our region. Of this, the least said, the better.

The truth is that Britain's main interests in the region are now trade, investment and security. In none of these is the Caribbean capable of substantially affecting British interests, as set within the context of its expressed global relations and objectives.

Hence, there is the appearance of a diminished and diminishing British presence. However, any such diminished presence and interest could hardly be more unfortunately timed.

For, the Caribbean is caught up in the exercise of trying to build a post colonial economy.

In a large sense, it is part of a process to seek the rediscovery of our own identity that was misplaced as the slave ships made their way through the Middle Passage.

We have accepted that our region must reposition itself economically, politically and intellectually to meet the challenges of the new global realities.

We have recognized that demands for permanent protectionism and permanent

non-reciprocity on our part are outdated, and that we must build more mature and modern relationships with our traditional allies and the global economy.

Hence we are far advanced on the enterprise to establish a Caribbean Single Market and Economy as the first step of satisfying the longstanding and deep-seated cultural vision of a single integrated region.

The Caribbean, however, needs to feel the presence of a most competitive British economy in its affairs. Withdrawal of support because the region has been relatively successful will be counterproductive. Indeed, a strengthened economic relationship, especially to ensure that the emerging CSME becomes a successful CSME, will enable most of the nations in the region to take the next steps necessary to become truly competitive and to survive and prosper in an open, global environment.

Crucial to our success as a region is the development of our human resources, and the pressing into higher service of such resources as the stimulus for Caribbean development.

I therefore modestly suggest for the consideration of the British government,

British business and civil society one fitting way in which a new partnership can begin to be forged. I propose the establishment of a William Wilberforce Educational Fund to commemorate the bicentenary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. The purposes of such a fund would be:

1) To finance, by means of scholarships and concessionary conditions, the education of dozens of [200?] students from the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) at British universities on an annual basis. This educational exchange was commonplace decades ago when distinguished Caribbean leaders like Sir Grantley Adams, Dr Eric Williams, Norman Manley and Errol Barrow studied in Britain. Indeed the whole vast area of human resource development was historically the core of the relationship between the Caribbean and Britain before the massive cost cutting of the 1980s took its toll. Nowadays, therefore, you are more likely to find Caribbean students pursuing their studies in Canada or the United States. We must change this.

2) To finance visiting British lectureships at the campuses of the University of the West Indies in areas to be agreed on.

3) To finance student and teacher exchanges between African universities

and the University of the West Indies.

4) To fund the establishment of a joint British-Caribbean Centre for Multi-racial Studies and Policy Development at the University of the West Indies.

A similar project actually existed many years ago at the Barbados campus of the university and might easily be re-activated. The Caribbean, as a result of the genocide of its indigenous populations, the mass enslavement of Africans, and the subsequent indentured servitude of Asians and Europeans, emerged as a unique, unprecedented experiment in human relations that was conceived, shaped and reproduced in the crucible of institutionalised racism.

Once nation states began to emerge from slavery and colonialism – from Haiti's Independence in 1804 to the political configuration that is now the expanded CARICOM - the overarching Caribbean project of nation-building has been to create out of ethnic pluralism and the fluidity of diasporic migrant mentalities a holistic vision of the nation that embraces and develops all inhabitants.

As a result, the Caribbean has become a global leader in the non-violent management of race relations, and has made exemplary advances in the establishment of relatively successful multi-ethnic societies.

Much, however, remains to be done, and the creation of a centre for multiracial studies would serve as an important focal point for showing us the way forward both in the Caribbean and Britain.

The William Wilberforce Fund, as I conceive it, would become the centrepiece of a new programme for British-Caribbean cooperation that goes beyond economic and financial issues, that goes beyond security issues, that speaks to a social development, that places a supreme value on cultural diversity and harmonious relations between people of different ethnic origins.

By the establishment of such a fund we will pay tribute to the courage and moral conviction of all those – black and white – who campaigned tirelessly for the end of the slave trade and slavery. Through it we will rededicate ourselves to those principles which inspired William Wilberforce and thus honour his work and his name.

And it will bring us closer to the vision, with which I now leave you, expressed in the poetry of Aime Cesaire in his “Return to My native Land”:

*“The work of man is only just beginning;
And it remains to conquer all the violence entrenched
in the recesses of his passion.
No race holds the monopoly of beauty, of intellect, of strength,
And there is a place for all at the rendezvous of victory”.*