

BICENTENARY OF THE ABOLITION OF THE SLAVE TRADE

The Rt Hon William Hague MP

20 March 2007

Mr Speaker, it is fitting that we in this House should be able to mark the occasion of the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade with today's debate and I am very grateful for the opportunity to reflect on what was such an important landmark in our nation's and our parliament's history.

I must declare a deep, personal interest in this subject as well as a formal interest, for I have recently completed a biography of William Wilberforce. Being an MP for Yorkshire, I have naturally revered the name of Wilberforce - the Parliamentarian from Hull whose decades-long fight to abolish and suppress the slave trade made him one of the greatest campaigners, and indeed liberators, in the whole of British history. His work, and that of his allies, is a truly inspiring story of high ideals pursued in spite of every conceivable adversity and enormous feats all too often preceded by despair, and as we approach the bicentenary of his and his allies' greatest achievement, the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807, it is appropriate that we should pay tribute to this extraordinary accomplishment.

For two hundred years ago, in this House, during the early hours of a cold February morning, Members of the Commons voted, by 283 to 16, to eradicate the practice of trading in human beings. As they rose as a body to salute William Wilberforce, the individual who steered the Act through parliament, he bowed his head and quietly wept. The Act itself was the outcome of a twenty-year parliamentary struggle of epic

proportions. Virtually every year, for two decades, Wilberforce had introduced similar proposals to the Commons, only for them to be rejected by powerful economic and political opposition, or to be thwarted by war, or hostility to the French revolution and social upheaval. But, this time, the Act received the formal assent of George III, and as the clocks struck noon on Wednesday 25th March 1807, the Slave Trade Abolition Bill became an Act, stating:

'Be it therefore enacted by the King's most Excellent Majesty, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and Commons, in this present Parliament assembled, and by the Authority of the same, That from and after the First Day of May One thousand eight hundred and seven, the African Slave Trade, and all manner of dealing and trading in the Purchase, Sale, Barter, or Transfer of Slaves, or of Persons intended to be sold, transferred, used, or dealt with as Slaves, practiced or carried on, in, at, to or from any Part of the Coast or Countries of Africa, shall be, and the same is hereby utterly abolished, prohibited, and declared to be unlawful...'

With these words the behaviour of an Empire was changed forever.

Today in this House, we are remembering what the then Prime Minister, William Grenville, described as the 'most glorious measure that had ever been adopted by any legislative body in the world'. This country was the first in Europe other than Denmark to outlaw the slave trade, and it was the catalyst for the adoption of similar legislation around the world. It became a moral benchmark of which other civilised societies rightly took note. The passage of the Act is also heartening to those who are conscious of the early foundations of our democratic society: firstly the wide dissemination of truths about the trade; followed by the shifting and then harnessing

of public opinion; with the actions and contribution of the slaves themselves coupled with the stoic perseverance of a few principled individuals; ultimately securing victory for the abolition of the slave trade in parliament.

But, unfortunately, the enlightened determination and actions of the abolitionists had to shine out against a far darker backdrop. The course of slavery winds long throughout history and when we consider events prior to 1807, it is with deep regret, that we acknowledge an era in which the sale of men, women and children was carried out *lawfully* on behalf of this country, and on such a vast scale, that it became a large, and lucrative, commercial enterprise, bringing powerful opposition to bear against its eventual repeal. The verdict, however, on Britain's participation in the trade is perhaps best left to someone who observed those depressing times. 'Never, never', cried Wilberforce in a speech to parliament in 1791, 'will we desist till we have wiped away this scandal from the Christian name, released ourselves from the load of guilt, under which we at present labour, and extinguished every trace of this bloody traffic, of which our posterity, looking back to the history of these enlightened times, will scarce believe that it has been suffered to exist so long a disgrace and dishonour to this country.'

All races were involved in the slave trade and the brutal treatment of the African people by white slave owners is an enduring example of racism. It was an important attribute of the abolitionists that they not only set out to end the slave trade but to demonstrate that former slaves could live freely and prosperously with equality between every race. They pioneered the free colony of Sierra Leone and gave much support to the leaders of Hayti when the slaves had overthrown their colonial government.

I am therefore convinced that this is an anniversary of great significance to modern Britain and I would like to congratulate the Deputy Prime Minister and his advisory committee for overseeing such a comprehensive and diverse programme of events to commemorate the bicentenary. Whilst he and I have often engaged in ‘lively’ discussion across the despatch box, this is a topic of such importance that the concerted effort of all parties is to be welcomed. As an independent who maintained friendships on every side of the House, Wilberforce would have certainly approved of the cross-party spirit on display today, and as a politician who refused to taunt his fellow MPs, he would have heartily approved of our unusual restraint.

The events surrounding the abolition of slave trade serve as a reminder of the responsibilities falling on us at all levels of national life: on the nation and its institutions, on parliament and her politicians, and on the individual. Once galvanised, as Britain was post-1807, we witness each working together for the noblest of ends. That is why just as the existence of the slave trade should be a cause of British regret, so its abolition should be a matter for British pride.

It was the British government which was the first of a major European country to legislate against the slave trade and after 1807, lobbied, bullied, and bribed other nations to follow forthwith. And, as the world’s foremost maritime power, it was the Royal Navy who bravely enforced the abolition: an assignment which was to become one of the most protracted and gruelling in its history. The suppression of the slave trade was described as ‘perhaps the most disagreeable, arduous, and unhealthy service that falls to the lot of British officers and seamen’ and between 1810 and 1850 the Royal Navy freed nearly 120,000 slaves. And so the moral case, once made and enshrined in the law, was upheld over the coming decades through a commitment to international diplomacy and the application of British force.

In Britain, the outlawing of slave trade has become synonymous with the life of one individual, William Wilberforce, and the outstanding qualities of courage and dedication he displayed. Wilberforce was, as he accepted, ‘only one among many fellow labourers’. We hear less about the contributions of men and women such as Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharp, Zachary Macaulay, Olaudah Equiano and Elizabeth Heyrick, - and we are of course unable to mention the bravery of numerous slaves on which history is silent – their actions never written down. But Wilberforce’s deeds and accomplishments are rightly lauded.

His motive – to remove ‘the foulest blot that ever stained our National character’ – is unquestioned. At a time when people in this country are sadly disillusioned with politicians and the political process, his conduct was of a most remarkable parliamentarian, placing mankind above party, principle above politics, and results above personal ambition. His purpose was unrelenting: during the late 1790s when popular interest waned, Wilberforce and his small band of colleagues kept the abolition cause alive, acting out his first promise that the trade was ‘so enormous, so dreadful and so irremediable... I determined I would not rest until I had effected its abolition’.

The contribution of these ‘Saints’, as they were known in this House, yielded a legacy with the eventual success of the Abolition Act of 1807, in spite of a political system that often worked in stubborn self-interest. Their triumph was to win the moral argument but in actual fact the trade was driven underground in the decades following the Act. It would take a further twenty-six years, after the enactment of the abolition of slavery itself in 1833, to terminate the illegal slave trade. For one man, this was the work of a lifetime.

One of the great achievements in the abolition campaign was political engagement through the mobilisation of public opinion. Once they realised that the nature of the slave trade was incompatible with the values they upheld, the British people acted in their hundreds and thousands: petitions signed by men and women with no vote and thus no method of lobbying parliament flowed from all corners of the country, including one measuring seven metres long from the inhabitants of Manchester and anti-slave trade tracts were distributed in their masses and vociferously devoured. Lectures and meetings were assiduously attended - Thomas Clarkson, an indispensable ally of Wilberforce, covered 35,000 miles on speaking tours around Britain between 1787 and 1794 carrying shackles and other instruments from slave ships, along with samples of African cloths to show that an alternative and civilised trade could be substituted for slavery - and in one of the first consumer boycotts of its time, West Indian sugar was refused. The humanity displayed by the British public was compared to 'tinder which has immediately caught fire from the spark of information which has been struck upon it'.

The moral case against slavery may now seem clear-cut, but then it had to be made in an age before mass-media and in a country where there were few graphic examples of the suffering and pain caused to millions transported across the Atlantic on British ships. The autobiographical writings of Olaudah Equiano, a former slave, contained a rare account of the conditions onboard - 'The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number of the ship, being so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. ... The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered it a scene of horror almost inconceivable...' His book became a bestseller and played a huge role in highlighting the barbarities of the slave trade.

Whilst advancing the case in the eighteenth-century Wilberforce appealed, ‘The nature and all the circumstances of this trade are now laid open to us; we can no longer plead ignorance, we cannot evade it...’ The same is true today. Slavery is out of sight to most people as it was two hundred years ago, but the world faces the same challenge nonetheless: to confront a ruthless industry exploiting vulnerable people for financial gain. Just as the baton from the abolitionists was passed on to other parliaments and nations around the world who followed suit in outlawing slavery, it now rests with governments and parliaments of our time.

Today, human-slavery reaches across every continent and culture, profiting from a whole range of different industries within agriculture, textiles, construction, mining, domestic services and prostitution, to name but a few. Human-trafficking, which is the most talked-about manifestation of modern slavery, is the medium by which this age-old practice permeates the life of modern-day Britain.

Human trafficking exists very much as a product of the twenty-first century. It operates within loose, global, networks; lurking amongst the unprecedented movements in people, information, and capital that characterise today’s global economy and which help mask these illegal practices. Human trafficking works best, for the instigators at least, across national boundaries, exploiting cultural, social, administrative, linguistic and economic differences to isolate individuals and thereby allow the criminals to exercise complete control.

Recruitment companies or trusted acquaintances offering work and hope of a better future, bogus marriage agencies and gangs targeting lone travellers as they enter new countries are just a few examples of how vulnerable people can become caught in the

human trafficking trap. Then, of course, there are the more barbaric methods of intimidation, threats to family, psychological abuse, followed by violence of a quite unimaginable kind.

Human trafficking is a growing problem locally and internationally. It has many links with other criminal operations such as money laundering, drug smuggling, and document forgery. In scale, too, it rivals and surpasses the other illicit trades, equalling the illegal arms industry and only trailing narcotics in its size. It generates, by some estimates, \$9.5 billion a year in revenue, which is a staggering figure to put on a market dedicated to the buying and selling of human beings. In terms of people, 600,000 to 800,000 men, women and children are estimated to be trafficked across international borders each year and according to the UN Office of Drugs and Crime, no country in the world is immune to this problem, be it as a country of origin, destination or transit.

It is indeed important that Britain wakes up to the gravity of the situation on her own doorstep. A fortnight ago, an official at the Lithuanian Ministry of Information declared that Britain is the 'number one' destination for gangs smuggling sex slaves from countries such as his own. When our police conducted a four month operation to tackle sex trafficking last year, they rescued 84 women. The list of their countries of origin tells its own sorry tale of the trail of misery – the women came from Albania, Brazil, China, Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, India, Iran, Jamaica, Kenya, Latvia, Lithuania, Malaysia, Namibia, Poland, Rwanda, Russia, Slovakia and Thailand.

To combat human slavery in the world, and in particular the international markets of human traffickers, we must seek to wipe out the economic profits available to

criminal gangs from their operations, thereby reducing the market size itself, and by implication the suffering caused. This can be achieved by a concerted and determined effort to disrupt the forces of demand and supply. Supply-side measures would be aimed at increasing the risks of capture, whilst simultaneously empowering vulnerable individuals through education, and the increased provision of assistance, advice and protection.

As long as the demand, or an end use remains, cold-blooded people will always find unscrupulous ways to profit from the trade in illegal goods, be they arms, narcotics or in this case, slave labour. Thus the only way to truly end the modern slave trade will be to wipe out the demand. With parallels to the eighteenth century sugar boycott, this is an area in which consumer groups can voice their abhorrence at slavery by purchasing certified fair-trade goods, such as tea and coffee, clothing and other consumables. A greater focus on educating the public would be required, using innovative approaches such as ‘The Truth Isn’t Sexy’ campaign which uses beer mat messages to alert young people to the realities of sex trafficking and has its cross-party launch in parliament later this evening. As traffickers have now infiltrated a range of British towns, cities and countryside, it is impossible to overstate the importance of bringing awareness to the consumers, businesses, and communities in those places where the victims are forced to labour.

Finally, we must also provide adequate support and rehabilitation for the victims. I am therefore delighted, along with all Members of the House, that the government has announced its intention to sign the *Council of Europe’s Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings*, which allows victims a thirty-day reflection period, as we have been calling for. We now await the formal ratification and a detailed implementation programme. The government will shortly publish its

National Action Plan on Human Trafficking and I look forward to reading the proposals. I very much hope that they will take heed of the recommendations set out by my Right Honourable Friend, the Shadow Home Secretary: to establish a UK Border Police Force with specialist expertise to intercept traffickers and victims at our borders; to conduct separate interviews at all ports of entry for women and children travelling alone with an adult who is not a parent, guardian or husband; to strengthen co-ordination between relevant government departments and Serious Organised Crime Agency in order to guarantee a coherent, joined-up approach; to ensure that every police force and every local authority has a strategy for dealing with suspected victims of trafficking and to increase victim protection by setting up dedicated helpline for those who have been trafficked.

Speaking as Shadow Foreign Secretary, I would like to see an improved and strengthened international effort to tackle human trafficking. The United States, through the State Department's *Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons* has elevated this issue, and amongst other endeavours, now produces an influential *Trafficking in Persons Report* on an annual basis. Other countries, including our own, must follow suit and act with the same levels of commitment. The international community should work together to identify countries that are most vulnerable to human trafficking, be they as a place of origin, transit or destination, and provide financial and technical assistance with prevention, law enforcement and victim protection, where appropriate. Diplomatic channels should also be utilised to put pressure on countries ignoring this problem. In extreme cases where cooperation is not forthcoming and no measurable improvement is made, assistance in non-humanitarian and non-trade-related areas could be withheld as a last resort. Finally, embassies and consulates should also take on a more proactive role, such as raising awareness through education and information programmes.

There are a number of principled individuals, just as in the early nineteenth century, who have set out to tackle modern-day slavery. People like Sister Ann Theresa, a Catholic nun who established an underground network of safe houses across the UK for the female victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation. Journalists such as Nicholas Kristof of *The New York Times* have investigated the horrors of human trafficking firsthand, bringing the reality of this crime to the mainstream media. And campaigns such as *Stop the Traffik*, a global coalition of charities, schools, community groups, businesses, faith groups and clubs which has taken its inspiration directly from the work of the early abolitionists; and has demonstrated a similar zeal and commitment. All of these groups and individuals are leading the way, but we will only start to challenge the traffickers' dominance, when we secure the support of governments, voluntary organisations, and, importantly, the public at large. Once public opinion is harnessed, this can be a powerful force as demonstrated two hundred years ago.

We must continue to bring this matter to the attention of all; otherwise the quiet and painful suffering of thousands of men, women and children in our cities and suburbs will continue as a humanitarian tragedy in our midst. There is no more fitting way to mark this bicentenary than by renewing the abolitionists' commitment to tackle the slave trade by practical action. In 1807 the House of Commons arrived rather late in offering the full power of the state behind the abolition movement. We, in this parliament, must ensure that we bring all of our collective political will to the centre of this struggle, helping to foster the involvement and education of our society, to extinguish, in the words of Wilberforce 'every trace of this bloody traffic'.