

SOAS ICOP Policy Briefings

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British Slavery: From “Atonement” to “Devising What Ought to Be Done” by *Dr Nathaniel Adam Tobias Coleman (Exeter), Prof Andrea Cornwall (KCL), Prof Brooke Newman (VCU) and Malik Al Nasir (Cambridge)*, based on *Prof John Coffey’s (Leicester) work on Parliament’s abolitionists.* (16th May 2023)

In his famous 1789 speech against the slave trade, MP for Yorkshire (1784-1812) William Wilberforce declared, ‘We are all guilty’, and he urged the nation’s MPs: ‘Let us make reparation to Africa’. Wilberforce recognised something that continues to be disputed: **the moral gravity of Britain’s crimes against humanity and the ongoing moral obligations this imposes on the nation.**

MP for Weymouth (1818-1837), **Thomas Fowell Buxton** (d. 1845), succeeded William Wilberforce as the official voice of British abolitionism. After twenty years of lobbying, Parliament abolished the Atlantic slave trade in 1807. Still, Buxton **faced a sceptical audience when he addressed the House of Commons 200 years ago this week, on 15th May 1823, proposing ‘[by slow degrees, and in a course of years...the annihilation of slavery](#)’** itself. Plantation owners had no *moral* right to enslave Africans, he argued. This was ‘[rank, naked, flagrant, undisguised injustice](#)’. Abolitionists faced a formidable lobby group: the West India Interest. With strongholds in the ports of Bristol, Liverpool, and Glasgow, and support from newspapers and leading periodicals, it had the backing of a mighty phalanx of MPs and the ear of government ministers.

Buxton made it clear that **emancipation was the bare minimum** of what Britain actually owed: ‘*For all the blood spilt in African wars fomented by English capital ... – for the tens and tens of thousands of men suffocated in the holds of our slave ships – for the tens and tens of thousands of emaciated beings, cast ashore in the West Indies, emaciated beings, ‘refuse men’ (for such was the mercantile phrase) lingering to a speedy death – for the tens and tens of thousands still more unhappy who, surviving, lived on to perpetual slavery... – [for all these, we owe large and liberal atonement](#)’.*

This atonement was not achieved in 1833 when MPs replaced slavery with apprenticeship. Wilberforce and Buxton’s efforts were premised on the belief that Europe was more advanced, enlightened, and civilised than Africa, and their abolitionism served to legitimise the perpetuation of white colonial rule in the Caribbean and the extension of British colonialism into Africa. Newly crowned **King Charles III has an opportunity to make history** by opening a national conversation about Britain’s role in slavery and the consequences of abolition. Seizing this opportunity would mean starting with a full, formal apology and engaging in dialogue with communities harmed by slavery’s legacies about what reparatory justice would look like from African-descended perspectives.

MPs can see what ‘large and liberal atonement’ might mean in practice by consulting a book published two years before Wilberforce’s speech. In *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species: Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants Of Great-Britain* (1787), philosopher Ottobah Cugoano called for an official ‘[enquiry into that great and pre-eminent evil for many years past carried on](#)’, namely ‘**the horrible iniquity of making merchandize of us, and cruelly enslaving [...] Africans**’. The purpose of this enquiry, Cugoano insisted, would be for us ‘**to devise what ought to be done**’. **It is now time for Parliament finally to heed Cugoano’s call: to craft a Bill to establish an independent Truth and Reparation Commission to enquire into, and to make recommendations for action to repair, Britain’s role, not merely in Britain’s so-called “slave trade”, but in British Slavery.**

To reflect on what ought to be done by Britain’s institutions, including the Crown and the Church, the [APPG on Communities of Inquiry Across the Generations](#) is hosting a panel chaired by Bell Ribeiro-Addy MP, with speakers Guy Hewitt (CofE), Brooke Newman, Esther Stanford-Xosei, with closing remarks by David Lammy MP. Please join us on **Wednesday, 17th May, 17.30-19.00 BST, Committee Room 16, House of Commons.**

For further information, contact the authors at andrea.cornwall@kcl.ac.uk; for access to other experts, contact Professor Alison Scott-Baumann at as150@soas.ac.uk and visit [our website](#). *The views expressed in SOAS ICOP Briefings are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of SOAS.*