

# Wilberforce address

## David Cameron

### The crime of slavery

First I want to do something quite simple and straightforward, which reflects what Katei has just said.

This is the moment to acknowledge the pain and devastation which slavery has caused, and which the legacy of slavery still causes, to Africans and to people of African origin across the world.

In the history of humankind, the slave trade stands out as one of the greatest crimes ever committed by man against his brother.

The reduction of a human being to the status of an economic unit, to be bought and sold for his utility to another man, represents an absolute denial of the dignity and equality of every individual.

### The transatlantic slave trade

Slavery has existed since the first civilisations appeared on earth.

But the transatlantic trade is rightly seen as the eternal symbol of slavery.

It was systematic, organised, and authorised by the law of the most powerful nation on earth: Britain.

It is almost impossible to imagine the suffering involved.

People were captured in their villages and fields.

They were force-marched to the coast, and held in dungeons.

Then they were consigned to the holds of ships where they spent weeks or even months at sea.

As a contemporary witness records, men and women were:

“chained two by two, right leg and left leg, right hand and left hand. Each slave had less room than a man in a coffin”

In these dark, cramped, airless conditions diseases spread quickly.

The dead were left to lie among the living.

If a slave protested or rebelled, he was simply thrown overboard, his manacles dragging him to his death.

On one occasion in 1781, aboard the slave ship Zong, over a hundred slaves were thrown overboard to stop the spread of sickness and protect the owners' investment in their human cargo.

Over many years, this vile trade was a staple industry of the British Empire.

It is estimated that up to 12 million men, women and children were sold into slavery in the Americas.

A large proportion of them were sold under the British Empire – captured for a market controlled by British businessmen and taken to plantations owned by British settlers.

The genteel scenes you could see in the TV version of *Mansfield Park* last week were paid for, at least in part, by the proceeds of slavery.

So let me acknowledge the pain and the legacy of slavery today in the words that William Wilberforce himself used, in his first speech moving the abolition of slavery in 1789:

“I mean not to accuse anyone but to take the shame upon myself, in common indeed with the whole Parliament of Great Britain, for having [allowed] this horrid trade to be carried on under their authority.”

### **Other campaigners**

Let me make it clear that I, and the Conservative Party, do not give all the credit for abolition to one man.

William Wilberforce was the leader of the Parliamentary campaign – but beside him stood some dozens of activists and campaigners.

As he wrote to the Prime Minister when the Abolition Act was passed in 1807, “I am only one among many fellow labourers”.

These fellow labourers were not all British, they were not all men, and they were not all white.

I think of Hannah More and Margaret Middleton – female campaigners who inspired the Parliamentary campaign.

But it wasn't just high society which resisted slavery.

By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, thanks to the efforts of a lady in Leicester called Elizabeth Hayrick, hundreds of thousands of households were boycotting West Indian sugar – a mass movement led by women.

I think also of the black campaigners, like the writer Equiano and the freedom fighter Sam Sharpe.

Black writers today point out that one of the most pernicious legacies of slavery is the sense of shame that millions of people allowed themselves to be enslaved.

Well, they didn't – most resisted, actively or passively, and some stand as heroes for oppressed people everywhere.

Young black people can find role models in the history of the abolition movement.

### **William Wilberforce**

And yet it is right that, this year at least, we remember William Wilberforce.

To me, he is an eternal example of what passion and commitment and integrity can achieve in politics.

Wilberforce represented to his generation and to the world a radically different idea of what politics is for.

In his day most politicians stood, first and foremost, for sectional class interests.

Beyond that they represented the exclusive interests of the nation.

And at the international level, foreign policy was about the practice of statecraft, detached from questions of morality.

More than any other politician, William Wilberforce changed that.

He elevated the role of the politician to something nobler than the defender of sectional or national interests.

And he convinced his country that there was something higher than statecraft – the pursuit of moral purposes, and the betterment of mankind.

Most important of all, Wilberforce helped turn the vast power of the British Empire to moral purposes.

Overall, I believe that the contribution Britain made to America, Australia, India, the Far East and southern Africa in the Victorian era was a good one.

The institutions of law, banking and government which Britain exported to her colonies are among the greatest benefits that one nation has ever given to the world.

But in nothing did Britain earn her right to be the most powerful nation on earth more than in this.

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century one of the primary tasks of the Royal Navy was to stamp out slavery on the high seas.

As John Stuart Mill put it at the time:

"for the last half-century [the British] have spent annual sums equal to the revenue of a small kingdom in blockading the Africa coast, for a cause in which we not only had no interest, but which was contrary to our pecuniary interest."

So let us have a balanced understanding of the Empire and Commonwealth.

It is to Britain's eternal shame that we supported the slave trade.

But it is to Britain's eternal pride that we stamped it out.

Both these things need to be known and remembered by our children.

### **The future**

I want to finish by addressing the future.

Because today we are not only remembering the slavery of the past.

We bring to mind the many thousands of people who are still trapped in slavery, trafficked as labourers, sex workers and soldiers – whether in the developing world or here in the West.

Between 700,000 and two million women and children are trafficked across international borders every year.

The dedication of William Wilberforce and his colleagues is still needed today, and I salute the efforts of modern campaigners to end this vicious abuse of human rights.

We must also address the state of Africa today.

I am pleased that there is a political consensus in Britain on the need for debt relief and foreign aid.

And I want my party to lead the debate on how we can help Africa beyond this.

Wilberforce himself, in that first speech in 1789, said this: "Let us make reparation to Africa, so far as we can, by establishing trade upon true commercial principles".

We should be doing all we can to promote indigenous economic development.

This means reducing trade tariffs and helping African nations develop the institutions of economic growth.

There is a golden thread that links property rights, free markets, free trade, the rule of law, honest government, sound finances, economic progress and social advance.

I want that to be the great project of this century, comparable to the role Britain played in stopping slavery 150 years ago.

And here at home, there is something else I want my party to do – help bring about the proper representation of black men and women in our national life.

It is not political correctness to want Parliament and local government to mirror the nation it represents.

It is a simple recognition of the need for role models in all walks of life.

I want children of every background and community to be able to look at the institutions which lead our nation – the judges' bench, the armed forces, and yes, Parliament itself – and see adults there that they can identify with.

To be able to say, if I work hard, I can get to the top.

As leader of the Conservative Party I must play my part in this.

In the past, my Party has failed to recruit MPs and local councillors who reflect the ethnic diversity of our nation.

As I hope you have heard, we are seeking to change this, and we are making progress.

We know have three times as many black and minority ethnic candidates as we have MPs.

But that's not enough.

We must do more, and I hope you will help.

The best legacy of this anniversary would be for today's black children to say in the future: "The anniversary changed things. That was the time my mother or my father decided to stand for election."

So don't think of politics as someone else's business.

Think of it as your business.

Think about standing.

Thing about taking part.

Think about making your voice heard in the councils of our nation.

### **Conclusion**

Finally, let me thank the Conservative Christian Fellowship for putting this celebration together today.

It is natural that it was Christian campaigners who led the fight against slavery in the British Empire.

And it is right that it is Christian churches who are today leading the commemoration of the abolition of slavery.

In the words of Isaiah, the Messiah came "to proclaim freedom for the captives".

I salute the work of you and your predecessors in fighting for freedom from slavery around the world.

Politicians are often accused of not being the best of listeners, but I had the pleasure of listening to a short address by Pastor Nims Obunge at the church service at our party conference in Bournemouth last year.

It was rather like my wedding day, as the sermon seemed to be addressed just at me.

Pastor Nims told me:

“The problem is that politicians are too concerned about the next general election. We need statesman who are concerned about the next generation.”

Amen to that.

As we gather to remember William Wilberforce and his fellow labourers, let us work together to build on their achievement.

Let us stand together to fight racism and exploitation in the next generation.

Let us work for the betterment of our country and the world.