



## William Wilberforce's 1789 Abolition Speech

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This document details one of two accounts of William Wilberforce's famous Abolition speech, delivered in the House of Commons on Tuesday 12 May 1789. Mr. Wilberforce now rose and said:

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When I consider the magnitude of the subject which I am to bring before the House - a subject, in which the interests, not of this country, nor of Europe alone, but of the whole world, and of posterity, are involved: and when I think, at the same time, on the weakness of the advocate who has undertaken this great cause - when these reflections press upon my mind, it is impossible for me not to feel both terrified and concerned at my own inadequacy to such a task. But when I reflect, however, on the encouragement which I have had, through the whole course of a long and laborious examination of this question, and how much candour I have experienced, and how conviction has increased within my own mind, in proportion as I have advanced in my labours; - when I reflect, especially, that however averse any gentleman may now be, yet we shall all be of one opinion in the end; - when I turn myself to these thoughts, I take courage - I determine to forget all my other fears, and I march forward with a firmer step in the full assurance that my cause will bear me out, and that I shall be able to justify upon the clearest principles, every resolution in my hand, the avowed end of which is, the total abolition of the slave trade.

I wish exceedingly, in the outset, to guard both myself and the House from entering into the subject with any sort of passion. It is not their passions I shall appeal to - I ask only for their cool and impartial reason; and I wish not to take them by surprise, but to deliberate, point by point, upon every part of this question. I mean not to accuse any one, but to take the shame upon myself, in common, indeed, with the whole parliament of Great Britain, for having suffered this horrid trade to be carried on under their authority.

We are all guilty - we ought all to plead guilty, and not to exculpate ourselves by throwing the blame on others; and I therefore deprecate every kind of reflection against the various descriptions of people who are more immediately involved in this wretched business.

In opening the nature of the slave trade, I need only observe, that it is found by experience to be just as every man, who uses his reason, would infallibly conclude it to be. For my own part, so clearly am I convinced of the mischief's inseparable from it, that I should hardly want and farther evidence than my own mind would furnish, by the most simple deductions. Facts however, are now laid before the House. A report has been made by his majesty's privy council, which, I trust, every gentleman has



read, and which ascertains the slave trade to be just such in practice as we know, from theory, it must be. What should we suppose must naturally be the consequence of our carrying on a slave trade with Africa? With a country was in its extent, not utterly barbarous, but civilized in a very small degree? Does anyone suppose a slave trade would help their civilization? Is it not plain, that she must suffer from it? That civilization must be checked; that her barbarous manners must be made more barbarous; and that the happiness of her millions of inhabitants must be prejudiced with her intercourse with Britain? Does not everyone see that a slave trade, carried on around her coasts, must carry violence and desolation to her very centre? That in a continent just emerging from barbarism, if a trade in men is established, if her men are all converted into goods and become commodities that can be bartered, it follows, they must be subject to ravage just as goods are; and this too, at a period of civilization, when there is no protecting legislature to defined their only sort of property, ion the same manner as the rights of property are maintained by the legislature of every civilized country. We see then, in the nature of things, how easily our practices of Africa are to be accounted for. Her kings are never compelled to wear, that we can hear of, by public principles, by national glory, still less by the love of their people. In Europe it is the extension of commerce, the maintenance of national honour, or some great public object, that is ever the motive to war with every monarch; but, in Africa, it is the personal avarice and sensuality, of their kings: these two vices of avarice and sensuality, the most powerful and predominant in natures this corrupt) we tempt, we stimulate in all these African princes, and we depend upon these vices for the very maintenance of the slave trade. Does the king of Barbess in want brandy? He has only to send his troops in the night time, to burn and desolate a village; the captives will serve as commodities, that may be bartered with the British trader. What a striking view of the wretched state of Africa does the tragedy of Calabar furnish! Two towns, formerly hostile, has settled their differences, and by intermarriage among their chiefs, had each pledged themselves to peace; but the trade in slave was prejudiced by such pacifications, and it became, therefore, the policy of our traders to renew the hostilities. This their policy, was soon put in practice, and the scene of carnage which followed was such, that it is better, perhaps, to refer gentlemen to the privy council's report, that to agitate their minds by dwelling on it.

The slave trade, in its very nature, is the source of such kind of tragedies; nor has there been a single person, almost, before the privy council, who does not add something by his testimony to the mass of evidence upon this point. Some indeed, of these gentlemen, and particularly the delegates from Liverpool, have endeavoured to reason down this plain principle; some have palliated it; but there is not one, I believe, who does not more or less admit it. Some, nay most, I believe, have admitted the slave trade to be the chief cause of wars in Africa. Mr. Penny, a Liverpool delegate, has called it the concurrent cause; some confess it to be sometimes to



cause, but argue that it cannot often be so. Here I must make one observations, which I hope may be done without any offence to any one, and which I do, once for all though it applies equally to many other evidences upon this subject. I mean to lay it down as my principal, that evidences, and especially interested evidences, are not to be judges of the argument. In matters of fact, of which they speak, I admit their competency; I mean not to suspect their credibility with respect to any thing they see or hear, or themselves personally know; but, in reasoning about the causes and effect, I hold them to be totally incompetent. So far, therefore, from submitting to their conclusions in this respect I utterly discard them. I take their premises readily and fairly; but upon these premises, I must judge for myself: and the House, I trust, nay, I perfectly well know, will; in like manner judge for itself. Confident assertions therefore, not of facts, but of supposed consequences of facts, however pressed by the Liverpool delegates, or any other interested persons, go for nothing in my estimation: and it is necessary that parliament should proceed upon this principle, as well in this as every other public question in which interested evidences must be examined. Thus the African committee have reported that very few enormities, in their opinion, can be practice din Africa; because in forty years only two complaints have been made to them, I admit the fact to the undoubtedly; but, I trust gentlemen will judge for themselves, whether parliament is to rest satisfied that there are no abuses in Africa, in spite of all the positive proofs of so many witnesses on the spot to the contrary. Whether, for instance, Mr. Wardstrom's evidence, Dr, Spaarman's, Captain Hill's are to go for nothing, any of whom either saw the battles, were told by the kings themselves, that it was for the sake of slaves they went to battle, or conversed with a variety of prisoners taken by these means. In truth an inquiry from the African committee whether any foul play prevails in Africa, is somewhat like an application to the Custom-house officers to know whether any smuggling is going on; the officer may tell you that very few seizures are made and very few frauds come to his knowledge; but does it follow that parliament must agree to all the reasoning of the officer? and though smuggling be ever so notorious through the land, must agree there is not smuggling, because the officer reports that he makes very few seizures and seldom hears of it? I will not believe, therefore, the mere opinions of African traders, concerning the nature and consequences of the slave trade. It is a trade in its principle most inevitable calculated to spread disunion among the African princes, to sow the seeds of every mischief, to inspire enmity, to destroy humanity; and it is found in practice, by the most abundant testimony to have has the effect in Africa of carrying misery, devastation and ruin wherever its baneful influence has extended.

Having now disposed of the first part of this subject, I must speak of the transit of the slaves in the West Indies. This I confess, in my own opinion, is the most wretched part of the whole subject. So much misery condensed in so little room, is more than the human imagination had ever before conceived. I will not accuse the Liverpool merchants: I will allow them, nay, I will believe them to be men of humanity; and I



will therefore believe, if it were not for the enormous magnitude and extent of the evil which distracts their attention from individual cases, and makes them think generally, and therefore less feelingly on the subject, they would never have persisted in the trade. I verily believe therefore, if the wretchedness of any one of the many hundred Negroes stowed in each ship could be brought before their view, and remain within the sight of the African Merchant, that there is no one among them whose heart would bear it. Let any one imagine to himself 6 or 700 of these wretches chained two and two, surrounded with every object that is nauseous and disgusting, diseased, and struggling under every kind of wretchedness! How can we bear to think of such a scene as this? One would think it had been determined to heap upon them all the varieties of bodily pain, for the purpose of blunting the feelings of the mind; and yet, in this very point (to show the power of human prejudice) the situation of the slaves has been described by Mr. Norris, one of the Liverpool delegates, in a manner which, I am sure will convince the House how interest can draw a film over the eyes, so thick, that total blindness could do no more; and how it is our duty therefore to trust not to the reasonings of interested men, or to their way of colouring a transaction. "Their apartments", says Mr. Norris, "are fitted up as much for their advantage as circumstances will admit. The right angle of one, indeed is connected with the left angle of another by a small iron fetter, and if they are turbulent, by another on their wrists. They have several meals a day; some of their own country provisions, with the best sauces of African cookery; and by way of variety, another meal of pulse, according to European taste. After breakfast they have water to wash themselves, while their apartments are perfumed with frankincense and lime-juice. Before dinner, they are amused after the manner of their country. The song and dance are promoted," and, as if the whole was really a scene of pleasure and dissipation it is added, that games of chance are furnished. "The men play and sing, while the women and girls make fanciful ornaments with beads, which they are plentifully supplied with." Such is the sort of strain in which the Liverpool delegates, and particularly Mr. Norris, gave evidence before the privy council. What will the House think when, by the concurring testimony of other witnesses, the true history is laid open. The slaves who are sometimes described as rejoicing at their captivity, are so wrung with misery at leaving their country, that it is the constant practice to set sail at night, lest they should be sensible of their departure. The pulse which Mr. Norris talks of are horse beans; and the scantiness, both of water and provision, was suggested by the very legislature of Jamaica in the report of their committee, to be a subject that called for the interference of parliament. Mr. Norris talks of frankincense and lime juice; when surgeons tell you the slaves are stowed so close, that there is not room to tread among them; and when you have it in evidence from Sir George Yonge, that even in a ship which wanted 200 of her complement, the stench was intolerable. The song and the dance, says Mr. Norris, are promoted. It had been more fair, perhaps, if he had explained that word promoted. The truth is, that for the sake of exercise, these miserable wretches,



loaded with chains, oppressed with disease and wretchedness, are forced to dance by the terror of the lash, and sometimes by the actual use of it. "I", says one of the other evidences, "was employed to dance the men, while another person danced the women." Such, then is the meaning of the word promoted; and it may be observed too, with respect to food, that an instrument is sometimes carried out, in order to force them to eat which is the same sort of proof how much they enjoy themselves in that instance also. As to their singing, what shall we say when we are told that their songs are songs of lamentation upon their departure which, while they sing, are always in tears, insomuch that one captain (more humane as I should conceive him, therefore, than the rest) threatened one of the women with a flogging, because the mournfulness of her song was too painful for his feelings. In order, however, not to trust too much to any sort of description, I will call the attention of the House to one species of evidence which is absolutely infallible. Death, at least, is a sure ground of evidence, and the proportion of deaths will not only confirm, but if possible will even aggravate our suspicion of their misery in the transit. It will be found, upon an average of all the ships of which evidence has been given at the privy council, that exclusive of those who perish before they sail, not less than 12½ per cent. perish in the passage. Besides these, the Jamaica report tells you, that not less than 4½ per cent. die on shore before the day of sale, which is only a week or two from the time of landing. One third more die in the seasoning, and this in a country exactly like their own, where they are healthy and happy as some of the evidences would pretend. The diseases, however, which they contract on shipboard, the astringent washes which are to hide their wounds, and the mischievous tricks used to make them up for sale, are, as the Jamaica report says, (a most precious and valuable report, which I shall often have to advert to) one principle cause of this mortality. Upon the whole, however, here is a mortality of about 50 per cent. and this among negroes who are not bought unless (as the phrase is with cattle) they are sound in wind and limb. How then can the House refuse its belief to the multiplied testimonies before the privy council, of the savage treatment of the negroes in the middle passage? Nay, indeed, what need is there of any evidence? The number of deaths speaks for itself, and makes all such enquiry superfluous.

As soon as ever I had arrived thus far in my investigation of the slave trade, I confess to you sir, so enormous so dreadful, so irremediable did its wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for the abolition. A trade founded in iniquity, and carried on as this was, must be abolished, let the policy be what it might, let the consequences be what they would, I from this time determined that I would never rest till I had effected its abolition. Such enormities as these having once come within my knowledge I should not have been faithful to the sight of my eyes, the use of my senses and my reason, if I had shrunk from attempting the abolition: it is true, indeed, my mind was harassed beyond measure; for when West-India planters and merchants retorted it upon me that it was the British parliament had authorized this



trade; when they said to me, "It is your acts of parliament, it is your encouragement, it is faith in your laws, in your protection, that had tempted us into this trade, and has now made it necessary to us." It has become difficult, indeed, what to answer; if the ruin of the West-Indies threatened us on the one hand, while this load of wickedness pressed upon us the other, the alternative, indeed, was awful. It naturally suggested itself to me, hoe strange it was that providence, however mysterious in its ways, should so have constituted the world, as to make one part of it depend for its existence on the depopulation and devastation of another. I could not therefore, help, distrusting the arguments of those, who insisted that the plundering of Africa was necessary for the cultivation of the West-Indies. I could not believe that the same Being who forbids rapine and bloodshed, had made rapine and bloodshed necessary to the well-being of any part of his universe. I felt a confidence in this principle, and took the resolution to act upon it: soon, indeed, the light broke in upon me.....

.....Having heard all of this you may choose to look the other way but you can never again say that you did not know.