

Should we apologise for slavery, colonisation and imperialism?

by Francis Bennion

Dr Evan Harris MP is backing the call by the National Assembly Against Racism for an apology for the slavery, colonisation and imperialism of Britain's past. When I saw this reported in the Bill Jacobs column in the Oxford Mail on 11 June, I wrote to Dr Harris to challenge him. Dr Harris believes the Millennium is an appropriate time to say sorry and take constructive action to tackle the legacies of the slave culture. He says 'Slavery and imperialism left a dreadful legacy. It is not just a question of making a gesture - although it would be an important gesture - but also doing something for the black community in Britain.'

I told Dr Harris it was a mistake to confuse the British Empire with slavery. I explained why. If British 'colonisation and imperialism' had not taken place many territories would still be living in conditions of primitive savagery such as we still see today in Rwanda, Ethiopia, Angola, and other African countries. I worked for the British Empire and know the great good it achieved, though obviously there were exceptions. I was in many different countries, including several years in West Africa, so I know what I am talking about.

Just to take one example, the British were implored to take over what became the Gold Coast colony by the Africans themselves (against the wishes of the Foreign Office). I know this because I researched it for my 1962 book *The Constitutional Law of Ghana*. The Ga people implored the British to enter in order to rescue them from the savage Ashantis, and they very reluctantly did so.

Many people write as though Europeans invented African slavery. In truth it was a feature of life there long before European traders arrived. From early times slaves were sent from Africa to Turkey, Arabia, Iran and elsewhere. African custom recognised slavery as a feature of tribal life. When Lagos in Nigeria was annexed by the British in 1861 it was for the purpose of suppressing slave smuggling. The first ordinances of the Gold Coast colony when it was established by Britain freed those treated as slaves by Africans themselves under their own customary law (Gold Coast Emancipation Ordinance 1874).

In any case I do not think it is appropriate for the present generation to 'apologise' for things their ancestors did. We need to remember that pregnant saying of L P Hartley's in *The Go-Between*: 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there'. There is something patronising - even absurd - about such presumptuous 'apologies' of one generation for others in the distant past. No one living today has any responsibility for what was done before they were born.

In his reply to my letter Dr Harris agreed that not everything about our imperialist past was bad, and that as empires go the British one may well have been one of the best. Nevertheless, said he, it cannot be denied that some of Britain's ports got rich on the slave trade, and the repercussions of that still reverberate for some of the black community in Britain. He went on-

'It is because of these continuing repercussions that an apology would not be inappropriate. I can partially agree that there is a danger of being patronising or gimmicky about such a policy of apology. Nevertheless, I think there would be much to

commend for this apology, and such an apology should not necessarily be taken to mean that people living today have responsibility for what was done by earlier generations. One, however, has a duty to recognise consequences (as for prisoners of war of the Japanese), and do what one can to move on.'

I question this. The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'apology' as 'An explanation offered to a person affected by one's action that no offence was intended, coupled with the expression of regret for any that may have been given . . .' This shows that the sort of apology Dr Harris intends would be inappropriate. The African slaves were not affected by *our* actions, as Dr Harris admits. And what about an apology from the descendants of those people, Africans themselves, who sold their fellow citizens into slavery and pocketed the proceeds?

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