

## **The British Empire and slavery**

*Letter from Francis Bennion to Evan Harris MP, 12 June 1999*

I saw the following item in the Bill Jacobs column in last night's *Oxford Mail*-

Liberal Democrat MP Evan Harris is seeking to capitalise on the Government's current passion for apologies by getting them to say sorry to the world's black community for slavery. He is backing the National Assembly Against Racism's call for an apology for the slavery, colonisation and imperialism of Britain's past. He believes the Millennium is an appropriate time to say sorry and take constructive action to tackle the legacies of the slave culture. The Oxford West and Abingdon MP said: '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 am writing on the assumption that this item is correct. If it is, I regret it.

First, I believe you are mistaken to confuse the British Empire with slavery. The entirety of the former should not be treated as damned by the latter. If British 'colonisation and imperialism' had not taken place many territories would have still been living in conditions of primitive savagery such as we still see in Rwanda, Ethiopia, Angola and many other African countries today.

In my youth I worked for the British Empire and know the great good it achieved, though obviously there were exceptions. I worked 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 Ashantis, and they very reluctantly did so.

On slavery, you may be interested in the following letter I had published in the Sunday Times for 26 January 1992-

Chief M Abiola of Lagos (Letter, last week) writes 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 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 another. No one living today has any responsibility for what was done before they were born.