

# The Case Against Reparations



Why the Church Commissioners for England  
must think again

Charles Wide KC, The Rev'd Professor Lord Biggar  
and Dr Alka Sehgal Cuthbert

Introduction by Lord Sewell of Sanderstead CBE





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# Introduction

Lord Sewell of Sanderstead CBE

My first institutional contact with Christianity came in the 1960s through my Church of England Sunday school, in Penge, South London. My parents came from Jamaica and my mother was brought up an Anglican in Jamaica. In the context of wider racism and a cold shoulder from other Christian organisations, my mother strangely felt more confident in sending myself and siblings to church rather than going herself. Maybe she hoped that the church would be slightly warmer to three cute black kids. We stayed in the church for most of our childhood and never experienced any racism, in fact it was where I learnt how to be aspirational and middle-class. What I am aware of was that black people did experience racism in majority white churches in Britain and I never remembered seeing a black vicar. What was worse was that the Church of England seemed to be quiet on the wider racism that clearly faced a people in school, work and on the street.

It would therefore seem strange that 50 years on, I would be introducing three insightful essays for Policy Exchange that have taken to task a scandalous over-reach by the Church of England in making reparations for historic Transatlantic slavery.

In one of the essays, Nigel Biggar sets out:

*The Church of England Board agreed to adopt its recommendations that money be ‘channelled through Black leaders, Black communities, and Black organisations’, to ‘invest in members of disadvantaged Black communities’, give grants ‘to fund initiatives led by and for people of African descent and Black communities through a reparative and intersectional lens’, and to publish ‘a summary annual report on the activities of the fund’.*

Why has the Church of England allowed itself to be grabbed by so many dubious activists and, worst, to inflict upon itself such moralist guilt? My sense is that the Church and its leadership had no concern about facts or historical rigour. This time they wanted to be on the cool side of history. An organisation desperate to be relevant, unable to operate under nuance and context, burdened by the so-called ‘lived experiences’ of those who may not have been welcomed by what had sometimes been a frigid and cold church.

The problem in weighing up the ‘sins of our fathers’ is that the scales need to be accurate, fair and without prejudice. That sin took place in the past is without question – but the degree and extent to which current

trauma and disparities can be directly attributed to any single cause is a question that must be addressed with evidence, rather than through a lens of guilt. Today we clearly have a church that is uncomfortable with its own doctrines, a key one being that the ‘truth’ will set you free. It appears to have slipped into a progressive relativism where feelings triumph over facts and where everything would be laid down on the altar of ‘lived experience’. Rather than addressing the genuine challenges in our society today, the church allows itself to be dragged into the quagmire of a narrative about the legacy of slavery and systemic racism.

The Church of England that raised me gave me my moral compass, agency, and some great biblical adventure stories. Its charge into the reparations fray is an embarrassing symbolic gesture, akin to those footballers and politicians who were taking the knee after the murder of George Floyd in the United States.

What the three scholars have exposed in this report for Policy Exchange is the lack of moral courage at the heart of the Church of England’s leadership. The Church did not know how to both keep its moral compass and speak to wider social issues at the same time. It didn’t care about facts and evidence, and forgot the needs of those white ‘deplorables’ who live in the hinterland, and who are the backbone of the Church and its parishes.

The Church of England’s leadership wished to find a way to turbocharge itself to the top of the race agenda. What better way than to offer an arbitrary figure like 100 million in reparations and link this to slavery. No one, from the Archbishop of Canterbury down, had the moral courage to stand up to the vagaries of the ‘diversity and inclusion’ propaganda. In many ways I have seen the way that activists have distorted the facts around transatlantic slavery to build careers, hustle grants and seek false compensation. This has been bolstered by universities, school curriculum and diversity agendas. Similarly, the Church of England avoids the deeper reflection required and has dived into the river, desperate to be seen as an institution that has been baptised and cleansed from the sins of institutional racism.

*Lord Sewell of Sanderstead CBE*



# Executive Summary

The Church Commissioners for England is a charity which exists to support the institutional Church, with particular obligations towards parishes. Its governing Board, supported by the archbishops and senior clergy, has launched a programme (Project Spire), to make reparation for C18<sup>th</sup> ‘links’ between its historic predecessor, Queen Anne’s Bounty, and the slave trade.

The project involves committing £100m to:

- ‘impact investments’ ... ‘in members of disadvantaged Black communities’, ‘channelled through Black leaders, Black communities, and Black organisations’;
- grants ‘to fund initiatives led by and for people of African descent and Black communities through a reparative and intersectional lens’;
- research and education relating to the alleged complicity in slavery of any part of the Church of England and anyone associated with it.

These commitments involve either sub-optimal higher risk/lower return or no return at all. It is intended to increase the fund, with a target of £1bn, using funds in the Commissioners’ care and by encouraging co-contributors.

This paper is in three parts:

1. The narrative, with critique of the substance and process. *Charles Wide KC*
2. A critique of reparation, in general and particular – taking the Rev’d Dr Michael Banner’s *Britain’s Slavery Debt: Reparations Now!* as representative of the arguments for reparations. *The Rev’d Professor Lord Biggar*
3. The divisiveness of reparations. *Dr Alka Sehgal-Cuthbert*

Collectively, these argue that the Church of England’s programme of reparations is problematic for two reasons:

- (a) Firstly, it represents a departure by the Church Commissioners from their core duties, of which international reparatory justice is not one, however worthy or not it might be in the abstract; and a diversion of funds intended for the good of parishes to a purpose

for which they were not intended.

(b) Secondly, that this specific act of reparatory justice is poorly justified, historically uninformed and overall inadvisable.

It is contended that Project Spire is based on:

- insufficiently examined preconceptions and contentious moral and political theory,
- flawed, narrowly selective, anachronistic historical understanding,
- a defective process which:
  - embedded activism rather than balance,
  - paid insufficient regard to legal or ethical propriety, at the outset or later,
  - lacked transparency, true accountability, and breadth of reference,
  - failed to address authoritative critique,
  - failed to consider competing views about the principles of, and criteria for, reparation and failed to justify the project by reference to those principles and criteria,
  - was/is racially discriminatory in formulation and outcome,
  - failed to consider the risks of division and to the reputation and authority of the leadership of the Church in the eyes of its members and the wider public,
  - breached Charity Commission guidance on decision-making,
  - lacked due consideration of the legitimate prior claims on the money entrusted to the Commissioners – especially those of parishes, where preaching the Christian gospel and performing pastoral acts of charity most effectively take place and which should be the Commissioners' highest priority.

Two years after its launch, the Commissioners have not yet resolved the project's legitimacy with the Charity Commission. It is reasonable to infer that this is because the project is *ultra vires*, outwith the Commissioners' legal powers and charitable purposes.

Project Spire should be of widespread concern. It is intended to set a precedent in the context of an international, political campaign for reparations, in which the Caribbean Community Reparations Commission [CARICOM] has long been active. As the established Church, with the King as its Supreme Governor, the Church of England may be seen to stand, in some sense, as proxy for the nation. The project's implementation would bring other institutions and organisations, public and private, under increased pressure.

Project Spire exemplifies the gap in the Church of England between its leadership (including that of the Church Commissioners) and its members in the parishes – ordained and lay. With a forthcoming change at the top, there is an opportunity to reset the relationship, starting with abandoning

this ill-conceived enterprise, while learning from it.

Church leaders should address, especially, the societal malaise which has been called the ‘meaning crisis’; something they should be well-qualified to do. In addressing issues with a political dimension, they should be concerned more with empirical analysis of present disadvantage, and the means of amelioration, than with historic cause. There should always be comprehensive consultation and the involvement of a wide range of opinion. Precise policy prescription, about which sincere Christians can disagree, should be avoided. The Board of the Church Commissioners (which is substantially populated by clerics and nominees of the archbishops) should refocus on support for the parishes – the invaluable, irreplaceable jewel in the Church’s institutional crown.

# 1. Healing, Repair and Justice or Division and the Misuse of Money?

Charles Wide KC

## Introduction

The Board of Governors of the Church Commissioners for England (hereinafter referred to as ‘the Board’)<sup>1</sup>, supported by senior clergy and administrators, seems to be determined to seek out any ‘links’ (however tenuous) between its historic predecessors and slavery and to make rhetorical and financial amends, using large sums of money originating from assets which were given or acquired to support parishes. An ethos of committed activism was embedded in the process and there was no wider consultation.

The Board decided to create a ‘Fund for Healing Repair and Justice’ (£100m to start, with a target of more than £1bn), having set up an intentionally ‘Black led’ Oversight Group to advise it. The Group contains a number of advocates for ‘reparative justice’ and a majority of ‘descendants of enslaved people’. The Board agreed to adopt<sup>2</sup> its recommendations that money be ‘channelled through Black leaders, Black communities, and Black organisations’, to ‘invest in members of disadvantaged Black communities’, give grants ‘to fund initiatives led by and for people of African descent and Black communities through a reparative and intersectional lens’, and to publish ‘a summary annual report on the activities of the fund’. Therefore, the Board signalled its intention to invest at higher risk and lower than achievable returns and to use money for purposes which provide no financial return. Furthermore, the Board intends, additionally, to pay the operating expenses of the Fund (at least initially) and to ‘commission and separately fund research’ into the complicity of the Church in slavery (including dioceses, cathedrals, parishes, clergy and ‘associated missions’). This project (called ‘Project Spire’) is intended to continue ‘in perpetuity’.

It is contended that these decisions, involving millions of pounds, were taken without adequate, balanced consideration of their legal or ethical propriety and without due consideration of the legitimate prior claims on the money entrusted to it.

It is in parishes that preaching the Christian gospel and performing

1. A charity to which reference will be made in the singular.

2. Although later it may, or may not, have revised from this, see: <https://hrifund.org/faqs/>

pastoral acts of charity most effectively take place. The Board's decisions have contributed to an ongoing break-down of trust between the Church's leadership and its grassroots in the parishes, whose dedication, performance of thankless tasks, and love of God and their neighbours keep those parishes in being and working.

The Board's programme is part of a wider movement. The advocacy of reparations<sup>3</sup> has become an international political cause. The Caribbean Community Reparations Commission [CARICOM]<sup>4</sup> has long been active. At the Commonwealth Conference in October 2024, the Prime Minister, while rejecting the payment of cash reparations, conceded an important principle by giving in to demands for 'discussions on reparatory justice'. Great importance is attached to setting precedents. The self-induced capitulation of the Church of England would have profound consequences. As the established Church, with the King as its Supreme Governor, it may be seen to stand, in some sense, as proxy for the nation. Many institutions and organisations, public and private, would come under increased pressure.

### Background

The Board is the governing body of the Commissioners, a charity created in 1948 by statute, combining the powers and duties of Queen Anne's Bounty (a fund set up in 1703-4 to help impoverished clergy) and the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. There are 27 members, including both archbishops, 4 bishops, 3 clergy, 2 cathedral deans, and 6 nominees of the archbishops. The Archbishop of Canterbury in practice delegates his role as 'chair' to a bishop appointed by him from those who are members of the Board. The Archbishop of York, however, does attend meetings. In 2023, from the income generated by an investment fund of £10.4bn, about £152m was distributed to 'support dioceses and the local church', £47m to support the 'Bishops' and Archbishops' ministry' and £14m for the cathedrals<sup>5</sup>. The Annual Report reflects the complexity of the Board's activities, legal and discretionary. It will be submitted that it has, collectively, adopted a 'top-down' approach and lost clear focus on its core functions, which include having 'particular regard to the making of additional provision for the cure of souls in parishes where such assistance is most required.'<sup>6</sup> Before considering the Board's reparation proposals, this paper will outline the unrepresentative, insufficiently accountable, elite culture from which they come and which controls, in particular, the distribution of money.

There is a widespread perception that there is a pervasive and harmful crisis of meaning in contemporary society. Many Christians identify this as essentially spiritual in nature and attribute it to the decline of faith. The response of the Church elite has been notable for its markedly secular priorities which have failed to meet this challenge. The Church's decline has continued unabated.

It is plainly the duty of Christians to be engaged with the secular political issues of the day. The Church has an important role in articulating

3. The Board does not like using the word 'reparations', preferring expressions such as 'reparative justice', on the basis that the project 'is not about paying compensation to individuals, nor is it purely about the money' and that they seek a 'better and fairer future for all, in particular for communities affected by historic transatlantic chattel slavery'. Such communities consist of individuals. The Board apparently believes they can be identified. The intention is to provide them with money, either by grants (which produce no return) or 'impact investment'. The Board has drawn a distinction without a significant difference.
4. CARICOM campaigns for 'the payment of Reparations by the Governments of all the former colonial powers and the relevant institutions of those countries, to the nations and people of the Caribbean Community for the Crimes against Humanity of Native Genocide, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and a racialized system of chattel Slavery'. See: <https://caricomreparations.org>
5. <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/the-church-commissioners-for-england-annual-report-2023.pdf>
6. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukcm/1998/1/section/8>

the distinctively Christian criteria which Christians should bring to those issues. Applying such criteria, different Christians will, in good conscience, come to different views in relation to detailed policy. However, Church leaders have repeatedly shown partiality in relation to such matters. Many Anglicans will have agreed, politically, with them but many will not. Bishops in the House of Lords repeatedly voted against the last government in the House of Lords, with the Bishop of Manchester (the Deputy Chair of the Church Commissioners' Board until January 2024) prominent amongst them<sup>7</sup>. Archbishops and bishops have often advanced or supported specific policies which, although they are given a theological gloss, are not unlike ideas which might come from any secular think tank.

A series of reports commissioned by the archbishops<sup>8</sup> provide cogent illustration of this. For example, the last of these, published in April 2023, concerned with 'Families and Households', urges the celebration of diverse family structures and treats marriage as if it were a social phenomenon of no greater Christian moral value than any other form of human combination. The archbishops, in their supportive Foreword, make no reference to marriage as an institution, despite it being, by the doctrine they are required to uphold, 'an honourable estate instituted by God' and has repeatedly been shown by empirical evidence to be the context in which men, women, and especially children are most likely to flourish<sup>9</sup>.

Whilst he was Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby<sup>10</sup> personally intervened in numerous political controversies on points about which sincere Christians disagree. For example, he has argued for higher levels of tax<sup>11</sup> and 'climate justice'<sup>12</sup>, criticised income limits for migration visas<sup>13</sup> and the 2-child benefit cap<sup>14</sup>, and called the policy of sending asylum seekers to Rwanda the 'opposite of the nature of God'<sup>15</sup>.

The strategy has doubly failed. The institutional Church leadership, as an unremarkable voice struggling to be heard in the crowded market place of secular ideas, has had little influence on public policy and has been unable to halt the Church's decline. There has been a collective failure to meet the deep spiritual needs of a society in which, as the social commentator David Goodhart has written:

*'[despite] the average British person [being] far richer, better educated and freer to choose their life path ... they are also more likely to live alone, to suffer from depression, less likely to have children and, if they are a child, much less likely to live in a stable family.'*<sup>16</sup>

Justin Welby's leadership seems to have contributed significantly to the creation of the culture in the Church hierarchy which forms the backdrop to the Commissioners' proposals. He was much concerned with the important, vexed and complex questions associated with race. This is as it should be. However, he seems to have approached such matters with a predisposition to criticise both himself and the Church he was leading. For example, purporting to speak for and about the entire Church, he said this to the General Synod in February 2020:

7. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/why-are-house-of-lords-clerics-so-anti-tory/>

8. For example, Archbishops' Commissions on:

Housing <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/coe-4794-hcc-full-report-v6.pdf>;

Care and Support <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/care-and-support-reimagined-a-national-care-covenant-for-england-full.pdf>; and

Families and Households <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/hf-report-digital-1-6-23.pdf>

9. For a useful summary, see: <https://marriagefoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/MF-brief-Marriage-as-a-social-justice-issue.pdf>

10. Who announced his resignation on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2024, relinquishing his duties on 6<sup>th</sup> January 2025, in the wake of the Makin Report <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/independent-learning-lessons-review-john-smyth-qc-november-2024.pdf>.

11. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-45412543>

12. <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/news/news-and-statements/cop27-archbishop-canterbury-says-world-near-point-no-return-and-calls>

13. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-67661489>

14. <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/news/news-and-statements/archbishop-urges-government-scrap-two-child-benefit-cap#:~:text=The%20Archbishop%20used%20his%20House%20of%20Lords%20debate,child%20and%20subsequent%20children%20born%20after%20April%202017.>

15. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-61130841>

16. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/11/09/unstable-family-problems-westminster-doesnt-care-motherhood/>

*‘There is no doubt when we look at our own Church that we are still deeply institutionally racist. Let’s just be clear about that. I said it to the College of Bishops a couple of years ago and it’s true.’<sup>17</sup>*

In that same speech, he lamented his lack of awareness of his own white, male, heterosexual ‘privilege’.

Three months later, George Floyd was murdered by a policeman in Minneapolis. This event sparked a wave of Black Lives Matter protests. The response of Justin Welby and Stephen Cottrell (the Archbishop of York) was a foretaste of what would happen in relation to slavery reparations. Before exploring this topic further, it is important to stress that it is bound to be the case that in the Church of England, as with any institution, there are people whose attitudes towards others who are different from themselves range from unqualified acceptance, through mild prejudice, to hostility. Furthermore, there will have been, and are, those who have been disadvantaged by having a particular characteristic. Such matters must be rigorously addressed. Doing so, however, demands a careful, open-minded, empirically-based, broadly representative enquiry, which would inspire general confidence.

Instead of such an approach, the archbishops set up an ‘Anti-Racism Taskforce’ which Stephen Cottrell admitted, and its resulting report said<sup>18</sup>, ‘was not intended to be a broad representation of different church contexts’. This Taskforce adopted Justin Welby’s repeated assertion that there is ‘no doubt’ that the Church is ‘deeply institutionally racist’ and declared the Church to have ‘theological foundations of prejudice and discrimination’.

The Taskforce worked during the COVID pandemic, never physically met, conducted no original research of its own (other than a ‘short public consultation’), and relied on reports (of variable age and authority) prepared by the Committee for Minority Ethnic Anglican Concerns (CMEAC). Although correlation should not be confused with cause, its report did not include analysis of whether any disparity of outcome might have an explanation other than racism. Nonetheless, the Taskforce felt able to make 47 uncosted and unevaluated recommendations, which were all accepted by the archbishops without further ado.

Part of the remit of the Taskforce was to provide nominees for membership of a new Archbishops’ Racial Justice Commission (ARJC). It did so without revealing the names it put forward or how it had chosen them (either the criteria or the mechanism). Appointments were then made by another opaque process. It is not a criticism of any individual member to say that it is hard to detect a wide range of opinion amongst the collective result.

To summarise the work of the ARJC is beyond the scope of this paper. However, something of the tone of its deliberations, and Justin Welby’s approach, can be seen in the controversy concerning the memorial to Tobias Rustat in the chapel of Jesus College, Cambridge<sup>19</sup>. Rustat was a C17th courtier whose many business interests included (largely unprofitable) connection with companies engaged in the slave trade. He gave vast sums to

17. <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/archbishop-justin-welbys-remarks-during-windrush-debate-general-synod>

18. <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/FromLamentToAction-report.pdf>

19. This controversy is described at greater length here: <https://thecritic.co.uk/issues/august-september-2022/how-the-church-blew-it-on-race/>

the college, none of which came from that source. The college authorities, supported by the Bishop of Ely, wished to remove the memorial on the basis that Rustat had been involved in slavery and the presence of the memorial caused pain, especially to the student body. In March 2022, after a contested hearing, a Consistory Court rejected the application. Historical claims made by those campaigning for the memorial's removal were found to be wrong and the college's Legacy of Slavery Working Party was held to have 'moved to judgement' before completing the necessary research. Thus, exaggerated, ahistorical assertions had collided with the facts and lost – the important factor being that there was an impartial tribunal to decide between competing contentions.

While the case was ongoing, Justin Welby had publicly thrown his weight behind the application saying, 'Why is it so much agony to remove a memorial to slavery?' His intervention was misconceived. The memorial was not to slavery and facts which were advanced in support of its removal were incorrect. The response of the ARJC to the outcome of the case was to assert that it 'presents a systemic challenge which requires a response if [the Church's] commitment to racial justice is not to be undermined.' It recommended wholesale change to the court's constitution (including 'suitably qualified assessors') and procedures (including giving greater weight to 'lived experience'). These proposed reforms would, if enacted, make it far more difficult to challenge falsehood before an impartial tribunal.

It can therefore be seen how ingrained are the presuppositions and particular political stances amongst the Church elite and the way in which those presuppositions and stances are perpetuated and advanced by embedding activism in the Church's processes. It can also be seen that, in terms of governance, there is substantial overlap between the institutional Church and the Church Commissioners.

### The Church Commissioners' Report (January 2023)

In 2019, two years after Justin Welby had told the College of Bishops that there was 'no doubt' about the Church's institutional racism, the Board set in train the preparation of a report concerned with the historic 'links' (a usefully imprecise word) with slavery of the funds managed by it. An understandable fear of reputational damage if others revealed such links, seems to have contributed to this<sup>20</sup>. A number of preconceptions are manifest in the explanation which was given in the resulting report, published in January 2023<sup>21</sup>. It is simply asserted, on the basis of 'reflection', that 'the transatlantic slave economy played a significant role in shaping the ... Church we have today'. As an unevidenced declaration, it reveals a collective mindset which suggests that the Board embarked on this project with a preconceived idea of the outcome.

This introductory passage continued with an entirely justified and uncontroversial depiction of the abhorrent nature of the slave trade but then, again without reference to supporting evidence or analysis, attributed

20. See the Board's Annual Report for 2023, p.52: [https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/the-church-commissioners-for-england-annual-report-2023\\_1.pdf](https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/the-church-commissioners-for-england-annual-report-2023_1.pdf)

21. <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/church-commissioners-for-england-research-into-historic-links-to-transatlantic-chattel-slavery-report.pdf>



to that trade contemporary ‘racial and class divisions and tensions ... in our society and, regrettably, in our Church’. More far-reaching sentiments were expressed by the First Estates Commissioner in a speech, on 25th October 2023, at the Bayes Business School<sup>22</sup>, when explaining the thinking which had led to the project. He made the controversial claim, as if it were irrefutable fact, that slavery (conflated with colonialism) was a key component of the growth which led to contemporary prosperity and, at the same time, is a cause of persisting, widely experienced harm and disadvantage. This was the lens through which the issues came to be interpreted. Indeed, it be may asked whether it caused the Board even to misunderstand the research which was commissioned by it.

A summary of the results of that research reads thus:

*‘... it is clear that Queen Anne’s Bounty held material investments in assets that were linked to the South Sea Company [which participated in the slave trade].*

*It is also apparent that a significant proportion of the Bounty’s income during the 18<sup>th</sup> century was derived from sources that may be linked to transatlantic chattel slavery, principally interest and dividends on South Sea Company Annuities and benefactions from wealthy individuals.*

*This income allowed Queen Anne’s Bounty to meet its day-to-day operating obligations (including the payment of augmentations to poor clergy) and also contributed to its wealth, the legacy of which may still be felt in the Church Commission today.’*

The uncertainty implicit in the use of the words ‘may’ and ‘linked’ (which appear repeatedly elsewhere in the report) should be noted. However, in this summary, colours were pinned firmly to the mast: the tainted sources of money (albeit ones that only ‘may be linked’ in some undefined way to slavery) were (1) South Sea Company annuities and (2) benefactions.

The relationship between Queen Anne’s Bounty [QAB] and the South Sea Company [SSCo] has been meticulously rehearsed in a paper by Professors Robert Tombs and Lawrence Goldman, published by *History Reclaimed*<sup>23</sup>. That paper also draws on the work of Professor Richard Dale and Dr François Velde. It should be read in its entirety for its meaning and effect. What follows is largely derived from it.

It is wrong to suggest that the income from the SSCO ‘may be linked to transatlantic chattel slavery’ and, reading their report closely, the forensic accountants engaged by the Commissioners do not say explicitly that it was. The SSCO was, from its creation in 1711, essentially a vehicle for converting government debt. In 1720, QAB converted some of its short-term government securities into SSCO shares. These were the only shares in SSCO ever acquired by QAB. The conversion was on terms which turned out to be disastrous and resulted in serious loss. In 1723, SSCO’s shares were, by statute, split into trading stock and annuities (paid by the

22. <https://www.bayes.city.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/2023/october/exploring-the-past-for-a-more-equitable-future>

23. <https://historyreclaimed.co.uk/the-church-of-englands-historic-links-to-the-transatlantic-slave-trade/>

government). QAB divided its holdings and, from this time, only bought annuities. The key point is this. Annuities had no connection with trade of any kind, let alone the slave trade. Annuities, therefore, could not have been a tainted source of money. The first limb of the Board's contention fails.

However, the shares are a different matter. That the Board seems not to rely on them may indicate an inadequate understanding. The shares were acquired by conversion at a time when the SSCO was not transporting slaves (because Britain was at war with Spain). Nearly all were sold in 1728, the rest being redeemed by Parliament in 1730. In the period between the resumption of the slave trade in 1721 and QAB's ceasing to be a shareholder, about 19,000 slaves were transported, about 3,000 dying en route – a sobering illustration of the evils of this trade. That QAB retained the shares during this time is reprehensible. There is some mitigation to be found in the avoidance of anachronistic judgement of a time (300 years ago) of a gradually awakening Christian conscience in relation to a nearly universal, age-old practice. It may also be said that the SSCO did not make a profit from its slave trading and QAB, accordingly, derived no financial benefit from it; indeed, as has been said, the shares resulted in substantial loss. It follows that QAB's ownership of SSCO shares did not contribute to a 'historic pool of capital' which benefits the Church today or which might be distributed in reparation.

It would be entirely unsurprising if, in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, some of the money given to Queen Anne's Bounty had resulted, directly or indirectly, from slavery. However, the work performed for the Commissioners by experienced forensic accountants has not proved that to have been the case or, if it was, the extent of it, or culpability on the part of the QAB and its Treasurer. The Commissioners' summary is notably vague:

*'Many of the individual benefactors were, or may have been, linked to transatlantic slavery (for example, Edward Colston was a benefactor) and to some extent their benefactions may have been derived from the profits of slavery or the plantation economy.'*

Later in the report, numbers are advanced. It is said that between 1708 and 1793 14% of QAB's income was in the form of benefactions and that benefactions increased in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Of the benefactions between 1713 and 1850, 'a significant portion (30%) was derived from individuals who were considered to have a very high or high likelihood of potentially being linked to the transatlantic trade in enslaved people'. The words 'considered', 'likelihood', 'potentially', and (the slippery) 'linked' should raise doubts in the mind of the reader. It is necessary to look at the methodology adopted to understand just how weak is the evidence that benefactors were 'linked' (a word which is nowhere defined) to slavery. Even if there were, other than in the case of Edward Colston (who had multiple other commercial interests and died in 1721, very early in the life of QAB), donations from them cannot be quantified nor can any continuing contribution to the funds administered by the Commissioners

be identified or quantified.

It is unusual to read an expert report which is so heavily qualified – the caveats which introduce it run to nearly 400 words. Any conclusions must be read in the light of these warnings. They include:

- ‘The forensic accounting ... has not been assessed by peer review to academic discipline standards.’
- ‘The forensic accounting aspects of the report may contain errors due to a lack of expert knowledge on the historical subject matter.’
- ‘Historical information and records are often incomplete and may be subject to different interpretations. Therefore, alternative conclusions may be drawn from the information presented in this this report.’
- ‘Much of the forensic accounting work involved the review of contemporaneous documentary records, many of which are several hundred years old and handwritten, in various degrees of legibility. Many words and names were encountered that had either been abbreviated, spelt in numerous different ways or which are no longer widely used in contemporary English. For these reasons, a degree of interpretation was needed to perform the forensic analysis. The report will very likely contain some errors that are attributable to this.’
- ‘The work on the Queen Anne’s Bounty ledgers suggests that they are likely missing certain relevant entries. As such, it has been necessary to make a number of assumptions and theoretical accounting adjustments in order to facilitate the analysis. It is very likely that some of these are incorrect.’
- ‘Numerous challenges were encountered when reviewing the benefaction registers. As with the Queen Anne’s Bounty ledgers, a number of assumptions had to be made in order to facilitate the analysis. It is very likely that some of these are incorrect.’

Reservations may reasonably be expressed that the period chosen for analysis was 1713 to 1850 (27 years after the abolition of slavery). This was on the basis that former, compensated slave owners ‘may’ (that word again) have given money to QAB. The criteria for deciding whether a someone ‘may have had links’ to slave trade piled speculation upon speculation. These benefactors were ‘categorised based on the likelihood of them being potentially connected to transatlantic slavery’. The cumulative effect of the nebulous expressions ‘likelihood’, ‘potentially’, and ‘connected’ renders any conclusion practically meaningless. The categories adopted were these:

- being active at the time of the South Sea Bubble
- involvement in politics (including being a member of the House of Lords)
- being linked to cities that were heavily involved in transatlantic slavery such as Bristol, Liverpool, London and Manchester
- being linked to industries that relied on transatlantic slavery such as cotton, copper or iron
- having naval connections.

No empirical statistical or other basis has been provided for these categories. They are so vague as to be almost incoherent. Even if a benefactor could be said confidently to have a relevant characteristic, and had some undefined 'link' to slavery, it could not be said whether the money he gave to QAB came from that source (as the report concedes in relation to Alexander Colston, who was distantly related to Edward by marriage). Nor can the motivation of any particular benefactor or the state of knowledge of the Treasurer about the benefactor's affairs (relevant factors in relation to culpability) be known.

During the relevant time in history, there were numerous people in Britain whose wealth derived, at least in part, from slavery. Some of them may have given money to QAB (Edward Colston obviously did). Furthermore, land bought to support impecunious clergy (for which, to some unknowable extent, such money might have been used) may have contributed, indirectly and to some unknowable extent, to the contemporary assets of the Church (very generally defined). However, it is contended here that the speculative nature of this chain of reasoning and the available evidence, the avoidance of anachronistic judgement, the Christian understanding that the line between good and evil runs through every human heart, the inability to identify or quantify any contemporary benefit to the Church, and the philosophical difficulty of fixing 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian congregations with vicarious liability for things done by people two or three hundred years ago and who cannot answer back, all make wrong the diversion of many millions of pounds away from parishes in dire need.

The Board has persistently presented this report as if it contained conclusive proof of deeply culpable complicity, on the part of QAB, in slavery, which contributed significantly to the funds it administers today. The uncertain, heavily caveated conclusions of the report have been depicted as more emphatic and more far reaching than they were. For example, Justin Welby in an interview in October 2024 said, 'We've put aside £100m, which is less than we gained from slavery'.<sup>24</sup> Nothing in the report (in which the vaguely capacious words 'may', 'potentially', and 'linked' recur) justified this sweeping, yet seemingly precise assertion. For further example, under 'Context' in the Oversight Group's Terms of Reference, it is said that, 'The research showed that Queen Anne's Bounty ... had links (through its investments it made and its benefactions it received) with transatlantic chattel slavery'.<sup>25</sup> The attentive reader will notice that the critical words 'may have' are missing from before the word 'had'.

The Board did not cause the research and its conclusions to be reviewed or subjected to any external critical scrutiny. Had it done so, the flaws, which have since been revealed, would have become apparent. Nor did it conduct any wider consultation. Furthermore, it seems that the Board leapt straight to proposing reparations, without pausing to consider the competing theological and secular arguments relating to a fraught, contentious issue, about which sincere Christians disagree. In other words,

24. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uCANRD0S2Q&t=3943s>. In the same interview, Justin Welby made a point often made in this controversy: that Bishops in the House of Lords voted against abolition. That this is fallacious is easily shown. When Anglican bishops repeatedly voted against the policies of the last government (for which many Anglicans had voted), they were expressing their personal opinions. They had no mandate or authority to bind 'the Church' by so doing.

25. [https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/project-spire\\_oversight-group-tors\\_v\\_5.pdf](https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/project-spire_oversight-group-tors_v_5.pdf)

even if the worst construction were put on the results of the research, in all the complex circumstances of past and present, would reparations be the appropriate response?<sup>26</sup>

Still further, there does not seem to have been any articulation of the tests which must be satisfied in relation to reparations, followed by careful analysis of whether those tests applied here and, if so, how. Not least among the resulting difficulties is fixing the Board, today, with vicarious liability for acts done up to 300 years ago, by a differently constituted entity, in profoundly different times, and after so much has happened, morally, politically, and economically.

Even if the vicarious liability of the Board was established, a further question would have to be asked. The assets in its hands are not its own, to do with as it pleases. The Board is a charity bound by its founding documents, charity law, and oversight by the Charity Commission. Any allocation of funds by way of reparations reduces the amount available for a number of beneficiaries (especially parishes) towards whom the Board bears legal and moral responsibility. Furthermore, reparations do not produce optimal returns on investment. This was plainly a case when beneficiaries who would be affected should have been consulted in accordance with Charity Commission guidance<sup>27</sup>. But they were not. Without being asked, those beneficiaries are, in reality, being compelled to make reparation for matters (about which the evidence is absent or speculative) for which they bear no responsibility. The statement issued by the Board on 10<sup>th</sup> January 2023 refers vaguely to a time of ‘significant financial challenges for many people and churches, and when the Church has commitments to address other wrongs from our past’ and includes a quote from Justin Welby: ‘It is hard to do this at a time when resources in many parishes are so stretched, but by acting rightly we open ourselves to the blessing of God.’<sup>28</sup> This does not amount to a careful balance of competing interests.

This same statement committed the Board:

*‘to trying to address some of the past wrongs by investing in a better future. It will seek to do this through committing £100m of funding, delivered over the next nine years commencing in 2023, to a programme of investment, research and engagement.’*

And, to that end announced the intention to set up,

*‘A new oversight group ... with significant membership from communities impacted by historic slavery. This group will work with the Church Commissioners on shaping and delivering the response, listening widely to ensure this work is done sensitively and with accountability.’*

It will be contended that ‘listening’ fell far short of being done ‘widely’ and the ‘accountability’ has been inadequate.

26. For a critique and analysis of the principles of reparation, see the Rev'd Professor Nigel Biggar's accompanying chapter.

27. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/its-your-decision-charity-trustees-and-decision-making/decision-making-for-charity-trustees>. This paper will turn later to more detailed analysis of this topic.

28. <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/finance-news/church-commissioners-publishes-full-report-historic-links-transatlantic-chattel>

### The Oversight Group<sup>29</sup>

It is not a criticism of any member of the Oversight Group [the Group], each of whom seems to have considerable qualities, to observe that, collectively, it appears to lack the wide diversity of viewpoint which is desirable for the vigorous dialectic which is necessary for the formulation and promotion of good policy. The impression is of a campaigning ethos, reinforced by the tone and content of the Group's report. It is contended here that the Board, having committed itself to a contentious project, then failed in its duty towards the whole Church by not ensuring that a wide range of views and interests were effectually represented and by embedding a strand of partisan activism in a process which required a properly inclusive, broadly representative, open-minded, empirical approach.

The Group reported in March 2024.<sup>30</sup> A notable feature of the report is that while it rightly set out the uncontroversial evils of slavery, it made no attempt at a proportionate assessment of QAB's responsibility for it. It simply asserted, at its outset,

'In 1704, Queen Anne established a fund to help poor Anglican clergy. This intent financed great evil. The fund, known as Queen Anne's Bounty, invested in African chattel enslavement and took donations derived from it.'

As has been seen in this paper, that did not fairly reflect the Board's report, flawed and heavily qualified as it was.

The report then went much further than the material contained in the Board's report to advance, using extravagant language, what are said to be the enduring effects of slavery, which are contested in almost every respect. A short chronology of claims for reparation is set out (including the Brattle Report<sup>31</sup>), and there are some statistics relating to the allocation of capital by 'white men', and wealth gaps in the USA and the UK (without reference to analysis of the range of possible causes). Otherwise, no evidence is advanced for any of its sweeping historical, economic, or societal claims. There is an abundance of scholarly research and opinion to the contrary, to which no reference is made. From reading the report alone, one would not know that its wide-ranging, polemically expressed declarations are even controversial.

Part B of the Group's report is headed 'THE ASSUMPTIONS THAT UNDERLIE THIS WORK'. Those stated assumptions go far beyond the findings of the Board's report. They are these:

- 'We came to our task with the clear understanding that truth must be at the heart of it. The British establishment, not least its established Church, has exacerbated and compounded the immeasurable suffering caused by African chattel enslavement. Denial and dissembling over this history have persisted for centuries. The damage done by those untruths demands repair.
- African chattel enslavement and colonialism created racialised inequalities, antiblackness, Afriphobia, racism and profound spiritual and cultural rupture. As a beneficiary and an enabler of African chattel enslavement, the Church of England

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29. See the website of the 'Fund': <https://hrj-fund.org>

30. <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/church-commissioners-for-england-oversight-group-report-to-the-board-of-governors.pdf>

31. 'Quantification of Reparations for Transatlantic Chattel Slavery', 2023, which estimated the relevant harm to be US \$ 100-131 trillion: <https://www.brattle.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Quantification-of-Reparations-for-Transatlantic-Chattel-Slavery.pdf>

demonised faith traditions and propagated hatred of humans created in the image of God.

- African chattel enslavement and its legacies continue to have a significant impact on communities today throughout the Atlantic hemisphere, nearly 200 years after the British abolition of enslavement. This impact is measurable in a variety of indices of racialised inequality. This inequality is apparent in everything from pregnancy and childbirth outcomes to life chances at birth, physical and mental health, education, employment, income, property and the criminal justice system.
- These impacts fall most heavily on descendants of enslaved Africans. But the harmful legacies of African chattel enslavement and the racism that underpinned it reach much further, toxifying whole societies and nations.
- The immense wealth accrued by the Church Commissioners has always been interwoven with the history of African chattel enslavement. The origins of Queen Anne's Bounty are just one aspect of this. African chattel enslavement was central to the growth of the British economy of the 18th and 19th centuries and the nation's wealth thereafter. Industries that benefited included iron and steel, shipbuilding, weapons, coal mines, woollen and cotton manufacture, farming, fishing, merchant banking and insurance. Many donors to the Church made their wealth through enslavement-based industries.
- Few people in Britain are aware of this. That ignorance perpetuates injustice. The stigma of inferiority that was applied to enslaved Africans shifts blame for economic and social disadvantage onto their descendants. This reinforces myths of white racial superiority. These help perpetuate a vicious circle of discriminatory economic and social practices.
- Only through truth and transparency can there be healing, repair and justice. The past cannot be changed, but we can act now to make different futures.'

The Group conducted a programme of 'community engagement' and a 'global questionnaire'. The resulting document, called 'Questionnaire Analysis: Key Insights and Findings'<sup>32</sup>, is puzzling. It refers to a 'Ghana Communion event' and a number of 'workshops'. However, there is no detailed account of these gatherings. The document is silent as to how many people attended, who they were, how they came to be there, whether they were representative and, if so, in what way. Nothing is disclosed as the factual basis on which any discussion took place. Accordingly, it is impossible for the reader of the 'Analysis' to assess what conclusions could be reliably drawn from these occasions.

The document refers at greater length to a 'questionnaire ... conducted gathering global perspectives on potential areas of investment', presenting its findings and providing 'further conclusions'. This 'global questionnaire' had 5,168 initial 'views'. Of the viewers, 57% began to answer the questions and only 19% completed them. A total of fewer than 1,000, apparently self-selected, people from around the world is a slender basis for making far-reaching decisions. Under 'Limitations', the report itself concedes that, 'the questionnaire may not have reached as wide and diverse an audience as desired, potentially impacting the breadth and representativeness of the data collected'. The complaint that £100m

32. <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/church-commissioners-for-england-oversight-group-questionnaire-report.pdf>

is insufficient is given as ninth of the ‘free-text responses’ (though the report is silent as to how many people raised this and the evidential basis on which they did so). Despite its lowly ninth position on page 21, this is given as first of the ‘recurring themes’ on page 5.

Nevertheless, the Oversight Group reported (in its Executive Summary, on page 2):

*‘Community engagement confirmed the view that £100 million will be insufficient for this purpose. The Church Commissioners have therefore embraced a target of £1bn for a broader healing, repair, and justice initiative with the fund at its centre.’*

This statement reveals that, first, the Board (through, it seems, the involvement of a ‘project team’<sup>33</sup>) was involved in the compilation of the Group’s report; and, second, the Board had agreed to its content before publication. As a further illustration of this, the Executive Summary of the Group’s numerous proposals is not couched in terms of recommendations, but as decisions which had already been taken. This chimes with the ‘Editor’s note’ (on page 2 of the report - to which this paper will return) but is at odds with the later use of the expression ‘recommendations’ and the statement (on page 4) that decisions about governance, structure, and legal status ‘would remain with the Board’.

### The Oversight Group’s Proposals

The Group proposed that the fund should,

*‘... form the nucleus of a larger investment initiative with target assets of over £1bn. This sum would come from: co-investors brought in through the convening and influencing power of the Commissioners; a larger allocation from the Commissioners themselves; and a revision of the investment policies of the main endowment to incorporate principles embodied in the fund.’*

The justification advanced for this is that the ‘overriding and consistent belief of the respondents was that £100m was not enough, relative either to the scale of the Church Commissioner’s endowment or to the scale of the moral sin and crime’. As has been suggested, insufficient source material for this far-reaching assertion is provided and, except in the most general terms, no particulars are given as to who these respondents were, their representative status, the evidential basis on which they expressed this opinion, or how they came to be consulted.

On behalf of the Board, it has been continually represented that any funding over and above £100m would be external to the Church’s existing endowment. On the contrary, the proposal, which has been adopted by the Board, is unequivocal: other than from co-investors, brought in by the Board using its ‘convening and influencing power’, the money is to come from the funds presently administered by the Board, by means of ‘a larger allocation from the Commissioners themselves; and a revision of the investment policies of the main endowment’.

The fund is envisaged to engage in ‘impact investment’ (for example, in Black-led businesses, in Black communities), give grants, and fund research ‘to uncover’ the complicity with slavery on the part of QAB

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33. See para 5.1 of the Terms of Reference [https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/project-spire\\_oversight-group-tors\\_v\\_5.pdf](https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/project-spire_oversight-group-tors_v_5.pdf)



and every part of the Church of England, down to parish level. The first necessarily involves higher risk and/or lower returns than might otherwise be obtained (if that were not the case, there would be no need to make special provision). The second and third generate no returns at all.

Some other aspects of the proposals which may be noted are these:

- i. Many features of the proposed operation are racially discriminatory<sup>34</sup>.
- ii. Of governance, while the fund should be ‘initially housed within the Church Commissioners’, there should be ‘an overarching, Black-led interdisciplinary participatory governance committee’, presumably exercising powers delegated by the Board, to which an investment committee and programme committee reports.
- iii. For 10 years, the Board (always referred to as if the money in its care is its own) should fund and otherwise ‘support’ the grant-making function.
- iv. In addition to the specific deployment, over 5 years, of the £100m to an ‘impact fund’, the Board should fund the operating costs of the fund (i.e. without taking those costs out of the £100m) and provide (i.e. pay for) the staffing of the investment committee on the same basis.
- v. The Board should commission and ‘separately’ pay for more research into ‘the involvement of the Commissioners [sic] and their donors in African chattel enslavement, including in the US (to 1865), and Cuba and Brazil (to the 1880s) where British capital was central to economies based on African chattel enslavement long after the abolition of enslavement’ and a series of initiatives to do with the effectiveness of ‘philanthropic impact’ and providing/disseminating appropriate ‘historical narratives’.
- vi. The Board should separately fund ‘research to uncover the full picture of’ the involvement in slavery by the Church Commissioners, Church, clergy, dioceses, cathedrals, parishes, and missionary organisations. ‘This research should be, where possible, led by communities that will benefit from it, particularly via young people. Its reach should extend beyond Britain.’
- vii. There is what appears to be a demand that the Church apologise for its mission to Africa.

**‘Penitence:** We call for the Church of England to apologise publicly for denying that Black Africans are made in the image of God and for seeking to destroy diverse African traditional religious belief systems. This act of repair should intentionally facilitate ongoing and new sociological, historical and theological research into spiritual traditions in Africa and the diaspora, thereby enabling a fresh dialogue between African traditional belief systems and the Gospel. This work should reach beyond theological institutions and be presented in ways that will enable all Africans, especially descendants of the enslaved to discover the varied belief systems and spiritual practices of their forebears and their efficacy. We recommend the Commissioners work with all faith-based communities to which descendants of African chattel

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34. And, accordingly, divisive. See further the accompanying chapter by Dr Alka Sehgal-Cuthbert.

enslavement belong.’

viii. There is to be no end to this process.

### The Response of the Commissioners and Archbishops to the Oversight Group’s report

According to the Group’s report, in November 2023 (therefore, before its publication), the Commissioners’ Board agreed to adopt all of its 41 recommendations. By this the Board seems effectively to have surrendered its wider responsibilities to an activist third-party of its own creation. The ‘Editors’ note’ on page 2 of the Group’s report, could be interpreted as an attempt to stop the Commissioners going back on what it had agreed. This report is on the Fund for Healing, Repair and Justice website. It has not been amended.

**Editors’ note:** This final report of the Oversight Group is an edited version of an initial report presented to the Church Commissioners’ Board of Governors in 2023. On November 23, the board met in York and accepted the 41 recommendations of the initial report. The same recommendations are mentioned in this final report’s executive summary and included in full further on. But it is important for readers to understand that while these recommendations are couched in conditional language, the Church Commissioners have already agreed to adopt them.<sup>35</sup>

That the contents of the report had been adopted by the Board before its publication is reinforced by the terms of the Executive Summary, to which reference has been made. The Board released a statement, on 4<sup>th</sup> March 2024, which does not qualify its ‘welcome’ in any way or suggest that the text of the report (which included the ‘Editor’s note’) or the press release from the Oversight Group (which appears on the same page of the C of E website) is wrong<sup>36</sup>.

This unqualified welcome and adoption, without any review or consultation, raises serious questions about the Boards’ collective judgement and sense of its legal and moral responsibilities, especially towards hard-pressed parishes. Proactive and specific application, by the Board, of the Charity Commissions’ guidance, ‘Decision-making for Charity Trustees’<sup>37</sup> seems to have been lacking. There should be wide consultation, especially in these circumstances, with beneficiaries who would be significantly affected. The consultation was, according to the ‘Questionnaire Analysis’ confined to ‘communities affected by the historical legacy of African chattel slavery’. The deficiencies of the Group’s report and ‘Questionnaire Analysis’ should have been obvious to the Board. Furthermore, their contents were bound to cause profound disagreement amongst church-going people who, with good reason, do not feel in the slightest way responsible for events of between two and three hundred years ago and object to vast sums being diverted away from them, when their needs are so great and so urgent.

35. See page 2: [https://hrjfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/6630\\_Oversight-group-report\\_ONLINE\\_FINAL.pdf](https://hrjfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/6630_Oversight-group-report_ONLINE_FINAL.pdf)

36. <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/press-releases/church-commissioners-england-warmly-welcomes-oversight-groups-report>.

37. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/its-your-decision-charity-trustees-and-decision-making-for-charity-trustees>

Subsequently, there was some qualification, illustrated by an article by Justin Welby which was posted on his official website, on 4<sup>th</sup> April 2024<sup>38</sup>. In it he complained of ‘unhelpful and often inaccurate commentary’ about the project adding, ‘so it’s important to get the facts straight’. To that end, he stressed the Board’s independence, observing ‘Bishops or Archbishops cannot make these decisions, quite rightly’. But he did not refer to the fact that he and Stephen Cottrell are, formally, members of the Board, that meetings are chaired by a deputy appointed by him (from among the bishops who are Board members), and that the Board includes 6 members nominated by him and Stephen Cottrell - plus three other bishops. Despite the presence of ‘inherited guilt’ as a leitmotif running through the Board’s and Oversight Group’s reports, he denied that the project was about reparations (an expression he thinks inappropriate) on that account. He referred to the Board’s use of ‘its influence and convening power to raise £1 billion’ without mentioning the intention to use more of its endowment, over and above the £100 million, and to change its investment policies. He sought to correct the interpretation of what was understood as the demand for the Church to apologise for its mission to Africa, maintaining that the Group were not calling ‘for any apology for anyone spreading the gospel anywhere’, adding his agreement that ‘repentance starts with honesty and transparency about the Church’s actions in purporting to spread the gospel in a way that caused harm to people of African descent’. How the Church caused harm when it spread the gospel in Africa, he did not specify.

### Response to criticism of the project

The proposals and the reasons given for them, were immediately and widely criticised<sup>39</sup>, by academic historians and theologians and by ordinary churchgoers who believe, with good reason, that the funds administered by the Board are, especially, for the support of parishes and not for politically contested schemes.

The response has been to double down. An article for *The Church Times* by the Chief Executive of the Church Commissioners<sup>40</sup> is representative. It exaggerated the conclusions of the Board’s report (for example, a heavily qualified, multiply *caveated* ‘likelihood’ of ‘potential’ undefined ‘links’ with the slave trade, became an emphatic, unqualified ‘likely to have been derived from exploiting enslaved Africans’). It failed to acknowledge the important difference between investment in annuities and trading activities. It described inaccurately the expert, critical analysis (which did not, for example, hold that the ‘South Sea Company’s enslaving activity was supposedly relatively insignificant’). Instead of dealing with the precise, carefully researched objections, it claimed that criticism is ‘offensive ... to those descended from the enslaved’. It asserted that the Board’s ‘financial contribution remains at £100m’, which is not what it had agreed to in November 2023, and disingenuously claimed that ‘not a penny donated to a parish church will be used’, when it is objected that money which should be available to help parishes is going towards this

38. <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/news/news-and-statements/archbishop-canterbury-slavery-healing-and-justice-all>, originally published in the Easter 2024 issue of the *Church of England Newspaper*.

39. Reference has already been made to papers published by History Reclaimed. Further discussion is to be found in the accompanying paper by the Rev’d Professor Nigel Biggar.

40. *The Church Times*, 14<sup>th</sup> June 2024

highly contentious, heavily political project.

A disinclination to engage and lack of transparency is to be found in answers given at the July 2024 General Synod<sup>41</sup>, in Qus.84-86, about the quality of the research on which the Board had relied. The Bishop of Salisbury, the Deputy Chair of the Board of the Commissioners, did not descend to particulars but said ‘historians Professor Richard Drayton of King’s College, London, and Dr Christienna Fryar have also been engaged in our work’ and described them (with the historians originally consulted) as ‘amongst the foremost specialists in this specific area of research.’ Both Professor Drayton and Dr Fryar (both of whom are members of the Oversight Group) might fairly be described as campaigning academics. This is not a criticism: they are perfectly entitled to campaign and, in the interests of sound policy development, it is good that they do. The fault lies with the Commissioners for establishing a process which did and does not involve a range of relevant expertise and opinion, including historians who disagree. The bishop also referred questioners to the article by the Chief Executive of the Church Commissioners, which has been mentioned above.

Qu.86 specifically raised the issues of independent review of the research on which the Board had relied and the Board’s legal authority to pursue Project Spire:

*‘In the context of the doubt and uncertainty, reflected by views being expressed in the media by senior historians and journalists, about the reliability of research conducted by and on behalf of the Church Commissioners (the ‘CCSs’) into whether or not one of their antecedent funds invested in and profited from the slave trade:*

*(1) Will the CCs initiate an independent review to check that there is a sound historical basis for their decision to create an ‘impact investment fund’ as a form of reparation?*

*(2) could the CCs please set out, by reasoned reference to statute, decided legal authority, their charitable objectives and their fiduciary duties, complete details of the legal basis upon which the CCs are empowered to allocate £100 million to the proposed reparations project from their General and/or other fund(s) from which this sum is to be sourced?’*

Saying that the Board stood by its research, the bishop effectively answered the first question ‘no’. Saying that the Board would act lawfully and, to that end, was ‘in discussion with regulators about such authorisations as may be required’, the bishop avoided the second question entirely.

In answer to Qu.88, the bishop made the familiar disingenuous point about the money not coming from parish shares (when, in reality, it must reduce the amount available for the support of parishes). He was asked [Qu.90] for details of what had passed between the Commissioners and Charity commission about non-income producing grants. He gave no details. In a vaguely unspecific reply, he referred to the need to satisfy legal

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41. <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/questions-notice-paper-july-2024-v2.pdf>

obligations and said that Commissioners' staff had been in 'constructive dialogue' with the Charity Commission, whose authorisation might be needed to give effect to its project<sup>42</sup>.

What the bishop did not reveal was that this 'dialogue' had been going on since the previous year and that that the Board was already faced with a deep, undisclosed problem: delivery of the project was proving hard to fit with its statutory powers and duties and charitable purposes.

### The Charity Commission and ultra vires

In the various pronouncements on behalf of the Board a note of anxiety may be detected about the lawfulness of what it was doing. Although the need to comply with its legal duties is referred to, the relevant provision of the relevant statute or other founding document is never identified. Instead, refuge is taken in the vague language of 'overarching mission', 'a mission to revitalise the Church', 'investing for a better future in perpetuity', applying the 'concept of Sankofa – looking back to move forward', and 'setting an example of moral leadership'. This raises the question, does the Board actually know what its legal powers and duties are? If it does, why does it not simply point to the relevant part of the relevant document?

The documents it has identified to Charity Commission as its founding documents<sup>43</sup> are:

- The Church Commissioners Measure 1947<sup>44</sup> (which merged QAB and the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, to create the Church Commissioners and provide for its structure);
- The Pastoral Measure 1983<sup>45</sup> (which has been replaced by the Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011<sup>46</sup>, by which the Commissioners have a role in pastoral reorganisation); and
- The National Institutions Measure 1998<sup>47</sup>.

The last mentioned provides for the provision of funds to the Archbishops' Council and includes this important section:

#### 8. Management of assets

*The Church Commissioners shall continue to manage their assets for the advancement of any purpose for which they held those assets immediately before the coming into force of this section, and in so doing they shall have particular regard to the requirements of section 67 of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners Act 1840 relating to the making of additional provision for the cure of souls in parishes where such assistance is most required.*<sup>48</sup>

This accords with the statutory purpose of QAB: 'For the Augmentation of Poor Clergy'.

The Board's charitable purposes are described as promoting 'the ministry and mission of the Church of England in the ways more particularly described in' those measures. If one looks at how the Board

42. He seems to have been referring to seeking authorisation for the scheme under S.105 of the Charities Act 2011.

43. <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/en/charity-search/-/charity-details/5014683/governing-document>

44. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukcm/Geo6/10-11/2/contents>

45. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukcm/1983/1/contents>

46. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukcm/2011/3/contents>

47. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukcm/1998/1/section/2>

48. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukcm/1998/1/section/8>

says it spends its money (which may not be the same thing), there is this:

Promoting the mission and ministry of the Church of England especially by supporting poorer dioceses with ministry costs, providing funds to support mission activities, paying for bishops' ministry and some cathedral costs, administering the legal framework for pastoral reorganisation and closed church buildings, paying clergy pensions for service prior to 1998 and running the clergy payroll.<sup>49</sup>

This does not suggest or point to specific legislative authority for what the Board is trying to do. If there were such provision in the complex web of legislation which applies to the seven national institutions of the Church of England<sup>50</sup>, the Board (especially in the light of the storm of controversy which its proposals have generated) would simply say, publicly, what it is. But it has not.

There are obvious objections. Such a project is not what the funds administered by the Board were intended for; there is a duty towards past generosity. Investments should be for optimal returns (subject to avoiding companies which trade unethically). Investments made for 'missional' purposes must necessarily involve higher risk or lower returns (otherwise they would be made anyway). Money which goes in grants, or is spent on research and public information, generates no returns. Therefore, the project prejudices the legitimate interests of beneficiaries. Although the Board is empowered to support the mission work of others, it has no business embarking on missionary work of its own, let alone setting up other entities to do so. The Board exists to support the Church's 'mission and ministry', not controversial projects of its own creation.

Before embarking on something so contentious, in which the process itself would be costly, the Board should have had a clear understanding of its powers and ensure that its intentions could be lawfully implemented. The fund was supposed to have been in operation in 2024<sup>51</sup>. It was not. The Board, contrary to its expressed commitment to transparency, has not been forthcoming about the problems it has encountered.

The Bishop of Salisbury's written answer to Q.90 at the General Synod in July 2024 said that the Board recognised that it may need the Charity Commission's authorisation for Project Spire. If the Board had applied to the Charity Commission for advice, under S.110 of the Charities Act 2001<sup>52</sup>, he could have said so. He did not say why or under which provision the Charity Commission's authorisation might be needed, but this may be a reference to S.105(1) of the Act, which provides:

Subject to the provisions of this section, where it appears to the Commission that any action proposed or contemplated in the administration of a charity is expedient in the interests of the charity, the Commission may by order sanction that action, whether or not it would otherwise be within the powers exercisable by the charity trustees in the administration of the charity.

Such authority would permit the Board to act in a way which would, otherwise, be *ultra vires*.

49. <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/en/charity-search/-/charity-details/5014683/charity-overview>

50. The Archbishops' Council, Lambeth Palace, Bishopthorpe Palace, The Church Commissioners, The Church of England Pensions Board, National Society for Promoting Religious Education, The Church of England Central Services: <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/national-church-institutions>

51. By a statement issued by the Board on 10<sup>th</sup> January 2023, commencement was to be later in that year: <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/finance-news/church-commissioners-publishes-full-report-historic-links-transatlantic-chattel>

52. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/25/contents>

The Board has continued to frustrate attempts to find out what has been and is going on. In an email dated 21<sup>st</sup> November 2024 (having been pressed for a reply to an email dated 25<sup>th</sup> September), Gordon Jump, the Programme Manager, the National Church Institutions of the Church of England, disclosed that discussions with the Charity Commission had been going on since 2023 and that the Board ‘was exploring the regulatory boundaries and working through the practical and legal details, and this includes liaising with the appropriate regulatory authorities such as the Charity Commission.’ He then repeated part of the Bishop of Salisbury’s answers at the General Synod. This communication revealed so little that, by email the same day, Mr. Jump was informed that a paper for Policy Exchange was in preparation and he was asked these questions:

1. When in 2023 did discussions with the Charity Commission begin?
2. Why was the idea of setting up a separate charity not pursued?
3. Has authority already been sought under S.105 of the Charities Act 2011 and an indication given that it would not be granted on the terms sought?
4. Reference is often made in documents relating to the project that it is within the Commissioners’ charitable purposes/statutory powers and duties. Exactly which section[s] of which statute[s] are being referred to? This is a key question: precise chapter and verse is needed.
5. Why, if the project is thought to be clearly within the existing charitable purposes/statutory powers and duties of the Church Commissioners, is it necessary to seek authorisation?
6. Is the problem essentially that the project is, in reality, outwith those charitable purposes/statutory powers and duties?
7. Have any interested parties been notified of these discussions? If so, who/which, when? If not, why not (as there are many with a legitimate interest in how the Church Commissioners use the money entrusted to them)?
8. What other regulatory authorities are being consulted and about what, exactly?
9. The project was promised to be conducted ‘transparently’. Why has no public information been given about such discussions (and, plainly, problems) as there have been?
10. There would seem to be breaches of the Charity Commission guidelines about taking decisions (especially consultation with beneficiaries who might be affected) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/its-your-decision-charity-trustees-and-decision-making/decision-making-for-charity-trustees>. Is there contemporaneous documentary evidence of these guidelines being specifically considered before decisions were made?
11. Why were the problems, which appear to have been predictably encountered, not sorted out before this project was launched or, at least, before the Commissioners accepted and adopted the proposals in the Oversight Group’s report (the content of which had been known for months)?

The reply (received, after reminder, on 10<sup>th</sup> December) included this:

‘Your questions demonstrate you have given this some thought and I’m grateful

for you pre-empting possible problems that may hinder our implementation.

I can assure you that the Church Commissioners are aware of their charitable purposes and powers. As I said in my previous response, the Church Commissioners are involved in discussions with their regulator, and we are aware of the technical issues which you have identified. The Church Commissioners recognises that its proposed response to its research into African chattel enslavement, known as Project Spire, must be legally sound and that trustees must comply with their legal obligations. The Board has authorised the Chief Executive and senior officers to liaise with the Charity Commission. The Church Commissioners recognise that they would require authorisation to apply their funds for the purposes of their response to Project Spire.

Our public statements to the General Synod have been clear that the Commissioners will not act unless it is lawful for them to do so, following their engagement with their regulator, and nothing has changed in that respect. The details of discussions which take place at the Church Commissioners' Board are confidential.

Once we have a more substantial update, you will be informed.'

Some 'details of discussions which take place at the Church Commissioners' Board' will be confidential, some will not – it depends upon the context, whose confidentiality is at stake, and for what purpose confidentiality is claimed. No justification for the blanket claim is made. In any event, answering the questions need not involve revealing 'details of discussions which take place at the Board', whether truly confidential or not. Furthermore, even if the Board could withhold information, it becomes a matter of choice. The information sought could be voluntarily disclosed by the Board in the interests of transparency, proper debate, and due regard for the interests of the charity's beneficiaries (especially as there are those who would wish to have a say in the matter).

Attempts to explore these issues with the Charity Commission have not met with much greater success. It has been disclosed that setting up a new charity to deliver Project Spire was initially discussed but not taken forward.

An email sent by the author to the Charity Commission dated 21<sup>st</sup> November 2024 included this:

'It may be that the Church Commissioners are seeking Charity Commission authority under S.105 of the Charities Act 2011. I am writing a paper for the think-tank Policy Exchange about this and, plainly, it is important to know (and in the public interest) if this is the case. You will know how very controversial these proposals are and that they adversely affect the interests of, in particular, hard-pressed parishes, to which these resources could otherwise be directed. There seem to be cogent grounds to conclude that they are outwith the law relating to, or, at least the spirit of, the Church Commissioners' statutory powers and that the process which has been followed contravenes the Charity



Commission's guidance on decision making by charity trustees.

I would be very grateful if you could tell me what the present situation is with regard to 'negotiations' (as the Deputy Chair of the Board of the Church Commissioners put it) between the Church Commissioners and Charity Commission. It would also be important to know whether, if an application for authority has been made, whether the Church Commissioners (or, indeed, the Charity Commission) have notified any interested parties, so that they may contribute to the discussion (for example, parishes, who have not been consulted in any way, might have strong views!).'

After a pressing reminder was sent on 12<sup>th</sup> December, a reply was received on 19<sup>th</sup> December. The Charity Commission chose to treat the email of 21<sup>st</sup> November as a 'Freedom of Information Request' and then construed it so narrowly as to reveal almost nothing of substance. The reply included the following:

'Item 1 of your request - what the present situation is with regard to 'negotiations'

The Commission is engaging with the Church Commissioners for England (CCFE) about its proposals.

Item 2 of your request - whether, if an application for authority has been made, whether the Church Commissioners (or, indeed, the Charity Commission) have notified any interested parties, so that they may contribute to the discussion (for example, parishes, who have not been consulted in any way, might have strong views!)"

The Commission have not received an application for an authority.'

An email sent by the author to the Charity Commission in reply on 20<sup>th</sup> December stressed the public interest in this matter and the desirability of transparency. It concluded thus:

'Would someone, who is involved in the engagement with the Church Commissioners, please set out a chronological narrative (with dates) of what has been going on, what legal or practical problems have been encountered, what attempts have been made to overcome them, and the current state of play. If someone would like to speak to me first, I would be pleased to receive a call (preferably, on the landline). If this raises issues susceptible to and requiring specific questions, these may follow.

I said in my email dated 21<sup>st</sup> November that the matter was of some urgency. It is of even greater urgency now.'

At the time of writing, no reply has been received.

The legal problems being experienced by the Board should have been dealt with before committing time and money to the process. That matters have not been resolved after more than a year speaks volumes. However,

it should be emphasised that the question of *ultra vires* is not determinative in relation to whether the Board's project should proceed. Even if it could be squeezed into a plausible legal structure, either pre-existing or created for the purpose, there are powerful reasons – set out in this paper and the accompanying chapters - why it should not.

### Charity Commission Decision-making Guidance<sup>53</sup>

The Charity Commission has issued guidance setting out '7 decision-making principles'. The guidance requires members of the Board (as trustees) to be able to show that they have followed those principles – a requirement which necessitates transparency. A number of factors point to failures by the Board to follow this guidance.

'Trustees must act within their powers.' The issue of *ultra vires* has already been discussed above. It appears that insufficient care was taken at the outset to consider, and keep under review, whether the project was within the Board's statutory powers and charitable purposes. The Board has, amidst much publicity and at considerable cost, launched a project about which legal difficulties were and remain unresolved. The duty to 'act in good faith' includes the obligations 'to share all details relevant to the decision' and 'consider all options'. As has been noted, there has been a lack of transparency and an apparent determination to make some form of reparation, without examining other options.

'Trustees must be sufficiently informed'. The historical and economic material considered by the Board was too narrowly sourced and did not explore abundant contrary academic opinion. It did not take into account sufficiently the heavily caveated nature of its initial report. When that report was subjected to authoritative academic critique, it simply carried on regardless. The collective ethos of the Oversight Group embedded activism in the process, rather than ensuring a broad range of information and opinion. The limitations of the 'Global Questionnaire' were insufficiently regarded. There was no adequate consultation. Information in the form of the views of church members, who would be adversely affected, was not sought.

There was no assessment of the risk of reputational harm amongst those (members of the Church and the general public) who profoundly disagree with the concept of reparation being applied in these circumstances. Nor was there assessment of the risk of reputational harm amongst the many Anglicans in Africa who may be concerned about the influence granted to body with a controversial activist ethos, which seems to have called for the Church to repent of its missionary work in Africa. It is legitimate to ask whether the Board, by continuing the involvement of the Oversight Group, having accepted all of its 41 recommendations, has, in reality, delegated its authority inappropriately. Compliance with the Charity Commission's guidance was all the more important in the context of a project which would be very complex, costly, and controversial (factors which the guidance explicitly identifies).

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53. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/its-your-decision-charity-trustees-and-decision-making/decision-making-for-charity-trustees>

### In short

The implications of the Board's initiative go beyond the Church. It is explicitly intended, as part of a campaign, to set a precedent and encourage others to follow suit. The hard-pressed, faithful members of the Church of England, who face the daily struggle to keep their parishes going, with no financial help from the centre, are dismayed by the diversion of so much money, when they are told there is nothing to spare and that the most the Church can afford for them is a part-time priest to be shared with 5 other parishes. With good reason, they believe that the Board's core function is to support parishes, especially those in need. To them, whatever the legal niceties, the Board is morally bound to attend to their needs as its first priority.

The flaws in this project are manifest and manifold. The outcome of the enquiry looks pre-determined. The methodologies deployed were faulty. Even taken at face value, and even if the principle of reparation were accepted, the response is disproportionate. The recommendations are racially discriminatory. The factual bases on which these costly decisions are being taken are a combination of the speculative, the contentious, and the plain wrong. Far-reaching suppositions, especially to do with the continuing effects of slavery, have been simply asserted. Activists have been given too much influence. No attempt has been made to seek and consider alternative views. Charity Commission guidelines for decision-making seem to have been breached. No coherent case, theological or secular, has been made for reparations at all, let alone the particular (unevaluated) reparations proposed. There has been a lack of transparency. After more than a year of trying, the Board has been unable to find a way of giving effect to its intentions lawfully. The Board has lost sight of what it is, essentially, for. This situation reveals confused constitutional arrangements and lack of accountability in the governance of the Board and the institutional Church. Wherever power lies, there is a strong argument that it has been and is being misused.

## 2. Slavery Reparations: Why They Don't Add Up

The Rev'd Professor Lord Biggar

54. NOTES: There is some uncertainty about what exactly the Church Commissioners have committed themselves—and the Church—to. An abbreviation of a longer report presented to the Commissioners in November 2023 was published as *Oversight Group Recommendations* in March 2024. The report's recommendations were “warmly welcomed” by the Board of Governors of the Church Commissioners. A press release stated that the “Church of England's investment arm accepts the report in full” (“Church Commissioners of England warmly welcomes Oversight Group's report”, 4 March 2024: <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/press-releases/church-commissioners-england-warmly-welcomes-oversight-groups-report>). And an editor's note in the report itself explains that “while these recommendations are couched in conditional language, the Church Commissioners have already agreed to adopt them” (*ibid.*, p. 2). Yet, there are two discrepancies.

First, the Church Commissioners do not in fact intend simply to ‘disburse’ £100 million, as claimed on page 2 of the *Oversight Group Recommendations*. They intend to deploy £100 million to create an “in-perpetuity impact endowment investment fund ... that will grow over time” (“The Church Commissioners for England: historic links to African chattel enslavement. Frequently Asked Questions”, no date, p. 1: <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/the-church-commissioners-for-england-links-to-african-chattel-enslavement-frequently-asked-questions.pdf>). If it is to grow, the fund cannot all be spent down. This implies that only a portion of its capital and annual profits will be disbursed. Indeed, the Oversight Group's recommendation 11 on page 8 mentions £30 million.

Second, it is unclear whether the fund will built up over five or nine years. As another document published by the Church Commissioners says, confusingly, “The Oversight Group have recommended accelerating the rate of investment so that £100 million is deployed in a five-year period. We will continue to honour our funding commitments to the Church while exploring how best to accelerate the deployment of the £100m, which will still span three triennia funding periods” (*ibid.*, p. 5).

55. Church of England, “Church Commissioners' links to African chattel slavery”: <https://www.churchofengland.org/historic-links-to-enslavement>

56. Church Commissioners, *Oversight Group Recommendations*, p. 5.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

### The case for reparations

In November 2023 the Church Commissioners of England committed the Church of England to deploy an initial £100 million of their assets over nine years to establish an investment fund, which, with the help of others, they aim to grow to £1 billion.<sup>54</sup> This commitment was made in response to the alleged discovery that the Queen Anne's Bounty, a forerunner of the Church Commissioners' endowment, had “links” with African chattel enslavement. It aims to “address some of the past wrongs”.<sup>55</sup>

An explanation is given in a document published by the Commissioners, *Oversight Group Recommendations: Healing, Repair and Justice*. “The immense wealth accrued by the Church Commissioners has always been interwoven with the history of African chattel enslavement”, it tells us. “African chattel enslavement was central to the growth of the British economy of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and the nation's wealth thereafter”.<sup>56</sup> Now, a strand of complicity in an abominable trade that still scars the lives of billions ... the cruelty of a multinational white establishment that deprived tens of millions of Africans of life and liberty ... has continuing toxic consequences resulting from the denial of equal access to healthcare, education, employment, justice, and capital.... Crimes against humanity rooted in African chattel enslavement have caused damage so vast it will require patient effort spanning generations to address. But we can start today ....<sup>57</sup>

And the way to start is by beginning to make reparations: “At the heart of reparations is the idea of repair: repair of damage caused by part injustice which continues via present injustice”.<sup>58</sup>

Observe, however, how this explanation consists of a set of assertions: that the Church's “immense wealth ... has always been interwoven” with enslavement; that slavery was “central” to Britain's economic growth and prosperity; that slavery was perpetrated by a “white establishment” upon Africans; and that today's descendants of slaves two centuries ago continue to suffer the effects of ancestral enslavement.

Observe, second, that every one of these claims is either dubious or false. The Queen Anne's Bounty was hardly involved in the evil of slave-

trading at all.<sup>59</sup> The contribution of slave-trading and slavery to Britain's economic development is a highly controversial matter, but most economic historians reckon it was somewhere between marginal and modest.<sup>60</sup> Slavery was perpetrated on black Africans by other black Africans (long) before it was perpetrated by white Europeans. And between abolition in 1834 and the present day all manner of other causes have intervened to complicate and diminish the effects of slavery.

Observe, third, how no mention at all is made of Anglican involvement in the dogged, half-century-long campaign to abolish the slave-trade and slavery; or of the fact that the British were among the first peoples in the history of the world to abolish them; or of Anglican involvement in the subsequent century-and-a-half of British imperial endeavour to suppress slavery worldwide from Brazil to New Zealand.

Observe, finally, how none of the Church Commissioners' assertions is supported by an argument, presenting evidence and negotiating controversies.

Argument, however, is surely needed. The moral duty to repent of wrongs we have done and to repair them as far as possible is Christian common sense. And while we cannot exactly repent of wrongs other people have done, if we have benefitted from their wrongdoing, we do have a responsibility to try to correct it. So far, so straightforward. Things become more complicated, however, the more time elapses between the past wrong and the present. The onerous effects of the original wrong become mixed up with—and maybe ameliorated by—other effects, so that the descendants of victims do not suffer as the victims themselves did. And historic beneficiaries of the wrong may already have invested time, money, and lives in trying to correct it.

Moreover, history is replete with wrongs from which we now benefit. Little or nothing that we inherit is without historic taint. The present Church of England occupies cathedrals and churches seized by the state from Rome during the Reformation. Some of its present wealth was almost certainly squeezed out of overworked and under-rewarded medieval serfs and 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial workers.

So, the question of which past wrongs to address and how best to address them is a complicated one that needs a careful answer. Yet, nowhere have the Church Commissioners felt it necessary to give one. Indeed, they appear to have surrendered the matter entirely to members of an 'Oversight Group' who, while sporting "a great diversity of skills and backgrounds",<sup>61</sup> contained no significant intellectual diversity at all. Evidently, they all shared the same basic assumptions, which they saw no need to subject to critical testing. This amounts to a serious failure of due diligence on the part of Church Commissioners.

### Michael Banner's argument

Whether he intended it or not, Michael Banner's book, *Britain's Slavery Debt: Reparations Now!*, does what the Church Commissioners have failed to do: it makes an argument in justification of reparations.<sup>62</sup> The bare bones of

59. Lawrence Goldman and Robert Tombs, "The Church of England's Historic Links with the Slave Trade", *History Reclaimed*, 1 July 2024: <https://historyreclaimed.co.uk/the-church-of-englands-historic-links-to-the-transatlantic-slave-trade/>

60. At least one member of the Oversight Group, Richard Drayton, Professor of Imperial History at King's College, London, must have known this—and yet he allowed the group's report to overlook it. For an account of Drayton's academic shortcomings, see Nigel Biggar, "The Drayton Icon and Intellectual Vice", *Quillette*, 27 August 2019: <https://quillette.com/2019/08/27/the-drayton-icon-and-intellectual-vice/>

61. "Church Commissioners announce members of Oversight Group to advise on response to historic links to transatlantic slavery", 24 July 2023: <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/press-releases/church-commissioners-announce-members-oversight-group-advise-response-historic>

62. Michael Banner, *Britain's Slavery Debt: reparations now!* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024.

his argument are these. Britain has profited “immeasurably” from the extraordinarily inhumane crimes of slave-trading and slavery between the mid-17<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Moreover, the abolition of enslavement and subsequent colonial government did nothing at all to improve the economic condition of the freed slaves and their descendants. As a result, Britain’s former colonies in the Caribbean continue to languish in chronic poverty.

There are, then, direct causal connections between, on the one hand, British slavery in the past, and on the other, British wealth and Caribbean poverty in the present. So, both to rectify the injustice done to Caribbean peoples by Britons’ ancestors, and to repent of the racism that first justified enslavement and then generated subsequent neglect, Britain needs to make reparations worth up to £250 billion. And the Church of England should lead the way, modelling to the UK government what a national programme of reparations would look like.<sup>63</sup>

### Relying on the unreliable

Throughout his book, Banner invokes the authority of Hilary Beckles, chairman of the CARICOM Reparations Commission. The main text is prefaced by a quotation of Beckles, which confidently asserts that, in respect of “the multiple crimes against humanity they committed in the region”, “the evidentiary basis of the case [for reparations by Britain and other colonising nations] has long been established”.<sup>64</sup> In the main text Banner cites Beckles repeatedly and wholeheartedly, writing at one point that, “to use Beckles’ most resonant terms, Europeans converted the Caribbean into a ‘criminal ecosystem’ designed to accumulate wealth without cultural or ethical constraints”.<sup>65</sup> However, judging by the overblown rhetoric, the historical inaccuracy, and the lack of intellectual rigour that characterised Beckles’ 2013 work, *Britain’s Black Debt: Reparations for Caribbean Slavery and Native Genocide*, Banner relies on an unreliable authority.<sup>66</sup>

### The hidden context: universality and African complicity

Banner’s book is typical of Black Lives Matter anti-racism in its relentlessly blinkered focus on the enslavement of black people by whites. The desired result is to make the evil of European-driven slavery seem extraordinary, standing out from all the other, manifold forms of injustice frequently suffered by peoples in the past, and therefore uniquely deserving of present-day repentance and reparation.

Yet, up until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, slavery was a universal institution, practiced by people of every skin colour on every continent. One estimate has it that Arab raiders from Tunis, Algiers and Tripoli alone enslaved between 1 million and 1.25 million Europeans from the beginning of the sixteenth century to the middle of the eighteenth century.<sup>67</sup> Another estimate reckons that the Arab slave trade as a whole, which lasted from the seventh century AD until 1920, transported about 17 million slaves, mostly African, exceeding by a considerable margin the approximately 11 million shipped by Europeans across the Atlantic.<sup>68</sup>

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63. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

64. *Ibid.*, p. xix.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 151.

66. For the grounds of my judgement, see Nigel Biggar, *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning* (London: William Collins, 2023, 2024), pp. 278-81.

67. Robert C. Davis, *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters: White Slavery in the Mediterranean, the Barbary Coast and Italy, 1500-1800* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

68. See Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, *Les traites négrières: essai d’histoire globale* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2004).

The most egregious oversight is African complicity. Banner reports vaguely that the slaves bought by British merchants “had been captured in war or simply kidnapped”<sup>69</sup> without letting on that the raiding and kidnapping was actually carried out by fellow Africans. Contrary to Hilary Beckles’ claim that African chiefs generally opposed the slave trade, the Beninese historian, Abiola Félix Iroko, has written that “[w]hen the slave trade was abolished [by the British], Africans were against abolition. King Kosoko of Lagos was against abolition at the time .... Of those who were sold and had offspring ... [s]ome returned home ... [and] became, in turn, slaveholders and bought slaves for their correspondents who remained in Brazil. Africans resumed this trade after abolition”.<sup>70</sup> John Iliffe, Professor of African History at Cambridge University, concurs, writing that “[m]any African leaders resisted the abolition of the slave-trade. Kings of Asante, Dahomey, and Lunda all warned that unsold captives and criminals would have to be executed”.<sup>71</sup>

### Was British slavery uniquely brutal?

While slavery in the sugar plantations of the West Indies was often among the most cruelly oppressive, the use of slaves on a massive scale for hard labour on plantations was neither invented by Europeans in the Caribbean nor confined to it. As Mohammed Bashir Salau has shown, they were established by Omani Arabs on the coast of East Africa,<sup>72</sup> and by the Fulani in the Sokoto Caliphate in what is now northern Nigeria, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, the Caliphate became “one of the largest slave societies in modern history”,<sup>73</sup> equaling the United States in the number of its enslaved (four million).<sup>74</sup>

Nonetheless, can it be claimed that the suffering of slaves on ships crossing the Atlantic or cutting cane in the British West Indies was unique in its brutality?<sup>75</sup> Not obviously. Of the plight of a white European slave of an Arab master on the Barbary Coast of North Africa, Henri-David de Grammont has written: “as chattel of whomsoever chose to buy him, he would be utterly without rights or a will of his own, his very life forfeit to the whim of his new owner, who ‘could resell him, overload him with work, imprison him, beat him, mutilate him, kill him, without anyone interfering’”.<sup>76</sup> The experience of the author of *Don Quixote*, Miguel de Cervantes, who was captured and enslaved in 1575, bears this out. According to a first-hand witness, Cervantes “was on the verge of losing it [his life] on four different occasions when he was nearly impaled or hooked or burned alive because he had sought to liberate many others.... In the end, the gardener was hung by a foot and died by drowning in his own blood”.<sup>77</sup>

Once the politically determined, myopic focus of BLM anti-racism has been loosened, and Caribbean slavery is allowed to sit in its global and historical context, the question naturally arises: Given that world-history is littered with instances of equally inhumane slavery, given the widespread complicity of Africans themselves in the transatlantic slave-trade, and given that Britain was among the first states in the history of

69. Banner, *Britain's Slavery Debt*, p. 15.

70. “Historian: ‘Africans Must Be Condemned for the Slave Trade’”, interview with Abiola Félix Iroko on Benin Web TV, *Free West Media*, 28 July 2020: <https://freewestmedia.com/2020/07/28/historian-africans-must-be-condemned-for-the-slave-trade/> (accessed 29 June 2021).

71. John Iliffe, *Africans: the history of a continent*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 159.

72. Mohammed Bashir Salau, *Sokoto Caliphate: A Historical and Comparative Study*, Rochester Studies in African History and the Diaspora, vol. 80 (Martlesham: Boydell & Brewer, 2019), p. 143.

73. Jan S. Hogendorn and Paul E. Lovejoy, *Slow Death for Slavery. The Course of Abolition in Northern Nigeria, 1897-1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. xiii, 1.

74. Salau, *Sokoto Caliphate*, p. 161.

75. See Biggar, *Colonialism*, pp. 48-51.

76. Henri-David de Grammont, *La course, l'esclavage et la redemption à Alger*, Etudes algériennes (Paris, 1885), p. 53. The translation from the French is mine.

77. Antonio de Sosa, *Topography of Algiers: Attempted Escape of Miguel de Cervantes* (c. 1577), in Mario Klarer, ed., *Barbary Captives: an anthology of early modern slave memoirs by Europeans in North Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), p. 97. De Sosa was a fellow captive with Cervantes.

the world to abolish slavery two centuries ago, why single out the British today to make historic redress?

### Was Britain's wealth built on the backs of slaves?

In addition to historical myopia, an important element of Banner's case for reparations is that Britain's current wealth owes a lot to the historic exploitation of the unremunerated labour of Caribbean slaves. Initially, he is cautious, acknowledging that the extent of the contribution of the slave-trade and slavery to British industrial prosperity is contested and endorsing Kenneth Morgan's "balanced" assessment that it would be wrong to claim that the profits from the trade were "a major stimulus for industrialization in Britain" and that they played only "a significant, though not decisive part" in its evolution.<sup>78</sup> This is, indeed, where consensus among economic historians settles.<sup>79</sup>

However, toward the end of the book as his advocacy reaches its climax, Banner abandons caution, telling the reader that Britain's social, institutional, and cultural capital "was immeasurably enhanced by the wealth generated by colonial slavery".<sup>80</sup> The choice of word is clever. In one, etymological sense, the claim that the beneficial effects of slavery are 'beyond measurement' is incontrovertible, since the available data are limited and many of the effects indirect and subtle. But that is neither the usual meaning nor its meaning here: here, 'immeasurable' connotes 'immeasurably huge'—as in 'immense'. By Banner's own initial witness, that is misleading.

### Did abolition in 1834 make no difference?

Vital to his argument for the continuity between the past and the present is his downplaying of the significance of the British abolition of the slave-trade and slavery. "What we [British] celebrate as the ending of years of gross and flagrant injustice and unfreedom", he writes, "was followed by years of gross and flagrant injustice and freedom".<sup>81</sup> He refers here to three distinct things: first, the four years of post-emancipation 'apprenticeship' of freed slaves until 1838; second, the conditions of Caribbean labour thereafter; and third, the economic record of colonial governments in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Of 'apprenticeship' Banner complains that it was "a form of tied labour".<sup>82</sup> That is true. Upon formal emancipation on 1 August 1834, all slaves over the age of six were required to become apprenticed labourers, paid for overtime, but bound to perform unpaid work for their former masters for between forty and forty-five hours a week for a transitional period. This period of apprenticeship was limited in duration to four years.

The justification was to give the plantations time to adjust and survive economically. This was in the interest, not only of the owners, but also of those freed slaves who would not be able to find land of their own on which to subsist and who therefore would depend on the plantations for employment. The planters had claimed that they faced ruin without compensation. But even after compensation had been conceded as a

78. Banner, *Britain's Slavery Debt*, p. 23, quoting Kenneth Morgan, *Slavery and the British Empire: From Africa to America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 83.

79. The most recent contribution to the debate about the economic effects of the slave-trade and slavery has been made by Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson in their *Slavery, Capitalism, and the Industrial Revolution* (2023). Here they argue that "the role of slavery in the process of industrialization and economic transformation ... has been generally underestimated by historians.... Slavery, directly or indirectly, set in motion innovations in manufacturing, agriculture, ... shipping, banking, international trade, finance and investment, insurance ..." (p.7). But David Eltis doubts it: "Even though Britain never had the largest slave empire and even though the Iberian powers clearly did, but never showed traces of industrialization, the authors are certain that their long list of descriptive links between the slave sector and the rest of the economy is evidence of slavery triggering accelerating economic growth first in Britain" (David Eltis, *Atlantic Cataclysm: Rethinking the Atlantic slave trade* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024], p. 147). Moreover, "all the evidence presented ... on the innovations in Britain facilitated by the slave trade or more broadly the slave system could just as easily have stemmed from conditions in British society that were not replicated in other European countries" (David Eltis, "Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson, *Slavery, Capitalism, and the Industrial Revolution: a review*", in *Eighteenth Century Studies*, forthcoming). Besides, Berg and Hudson are in fact very cautious in what they claim: "We do not argue that slavery caused the industrial revolution", they write. "Neither do we suggest that slavery was necessary for the development of industrial capitalism in Britain. Even less does our study attempt to estimate that the gains from slavery contributed a particular percentage of Britain's economic growth, GDP or capital formation in the eighteenth century, as earlier studies have attempted.... many aspects of the impact of slavery are not measurable in quantitative terms" (p. 7). Such modesty falls a long way short of endorsing Eric Williams' claim of slavery's "enormous" contribution to Britain's industrial prosperity. It also employs an appropriately strict concept of immeasurability.

80. Banner, *Britain's Slavery Debt*, p. 121. The italics are mine.

81. *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 54.

82. *Ibid.*, p. 2.



necessary political compromise to secure the parliamentary passage of the Act for the Abolition of Slavery in 1833, many planters sold up within twenty years of emancipation, which suggests that their business model was indeed precarious.

After the apprenticeship scheme was terminated in 1838, it is true that free blacks were often subjected to unfair contracts and constraints on free wage-bargaining.<sup>83</sup> Consequently, many opted to emigrate, especially in the economic depression of the 1880s. This, of course, would have been impossible under slavery and was one of the freedoms brought about by emancipation. Further, according to B. W. Higman, in post-emancipation Jamaica there occurred a rapid creation of a “new class of black smallholders”, who were largely independent of wage-labour.<sup>84</sup> As for unfair contracts, constraints on wage-bargaining, and emigration—those would all have been perfectly familiar to white rural and industrial workers in Victorian Britain. The condition of workers in the West Indies after emancipation was, by our privileged, twenty-first century Western standards, very poor indeed. But so it was for most people worldwide. The past is a foreign country; they did things very differently

### Was colonial government negligent?

What about the character of colonial government? “The central continuity” between the periods of slavery and emancipation, writes Banner, “is that colonial power continued to be exercised in the interests of the metropole, white elites, and British capital, and with little regard to the interests of the colonies and their people .... Britain conceived no future for the Caribbean except as a source of cheap raw materials, and as a market for British products”.<sup>85</sup> Banner, following Beckles, labels this “extractive colonialism”.<sup>86</sup> However, the neo-Marxist theory of colonial economics that Banner adopts here tends to come off worse when confronted with the empirical data.<sup>87</sup> Rudolf von Albertini, whose work was based “on exhaustive examination of the literature on most parts of the colonial world to 1940” (according to the eminent imperial economic historian, David Fieldhouse) judged “that colonial economics cannot be understood through concepts such as plunder economics and exploitation”.<sup>88</sup>

It is true that, for most of their history, colonial governments did not usually direct the economic development of their colonies. That is because, like most governments until the third decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the public goods they served were mainly the maintenance of internal law and order and external defence. Up until 1914, British government spending during peacetime was only about 8 per cent of GDP; US government spending, about 3 per cent.<sup>89</sup> It was the experience of beneficial state control of the economy during the two world wars and Great Depression in between that ushered in the era of much bigger, more interventionist government. (By 2022, the figures for the UK and the US had risen, respectively, to 44 per cent and 36 per cent.<sup>90</sup>) Nonetheless, by establishing the rule of law and sufficiently stable government, even small colonial government indirectly encouraged private investment. The leading exporter of capital

83. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

84. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

85. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

86. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

87. See Biggar, *Colonialism*, pp. 40, 119-20, 254-5, 436n.45, 439-40n.81, 440-1n.84, 475n.180.

88. D. K. Fieldhouse, *The West and the Third World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 168; R. von Albertini with Albert Wirz, *European Colonial Rule, 1880-1940: The Impact of the West on India, Southeast Asia, and Africa*, trans. John G. Williamson (Oxford: Clío, 1982), p. 507.

89. Philip Brien and Matthew Keep, *The Public Finances: An historical overview*, Briefing Paper 8265 (London: House of Commons Library, 20 March 2018), p. 4: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8265/CBP-8265.pdf> (accessed on 22 July 2024); Kenneth Whyte, *Hoover: An extraordinary life in extraordinary times* (New York: Vintage, 2017), pp. 259-60.

90. International Monetary Fund, *Government expenditure, percent of GDP* (New York: IMF, 2024): <https://www.imf.org/external/data-mapper/exp@FPP/USA/FRA/JPN/GBR/SWE/ESP/ITA/ZAF/IND> (accessed on 22 July 2024).

from the mid-nineteenth century to at least 1929, Britain invested over a third of its overseas capital in the Empire between 1865 and 1914,<sup>91</sup> 10.48 per cent of which went to ‘dependent colonies’ such as those in the West Indies.<sup>92</sup>

In addition, the imperial government did start to shoulder responsibility for direct development, starting with the Colonial Development Act 1929.<sup>93</sup> Eleven years later, the Colonial Development and Welfare Act 1940 authorised expenditure of up to £5 million per annum on colonial development and welfare for a ten-year period and £500,000 for colonial research annually without term. Unfortunately, wartime exigences prevented implementation.<sup>94</sup> At the war’s end, when Britain was bankrupt, a much more generous Colonial Development and Welfare Act 1945 increased the funding available to £120 million (worth about £6.5 billion today) over a ten-year period.<sup>95</sup>

Given all this, it is not true to say that British colonial governments in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries did nothing toward the economic development of the West Indies. They did play a role in development, initially indirect, latterly direct. But did they underdevelop? To answer that question, we first need to know what measure is being applied—what the correct level of development is supposed to have been and how ‘correctness’ is being determined. Banner does not tell us.

### What of post-colonial responsibility for post-colonial woes?

Beckles claims, and Banner echoes him, that colonial governments did the Caribbean no economic good at all and left the West Indian colonies completely unprepared to stand on their own economic feet after formal independence in the 1960s. But Tirthankar Roy, the West Bengal-born Professor of Economic History at the London School of Economics and author of *The Economic History of Colonialism*, strongly disagrees:<sup>96</sup>

*The claim that Caribbean states were not able to ‘find their feet’ at independence around 1962 is total rubbish. Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Barbados had the highest average income and literacy rates in the region, incomes per head were three to four times that in the long-independent Dominican Republic and Haiti, literacy rates were around 15 [per cent] in Haiti and 75-80 [per cent] in Jamaica. Almost certainly, public health was also similarly advanced.<sup>97</sup>*

As for the causes of the present economic woes of Britain’s former colonies in the West Indies, Roy has this to say:

*Jamaica after independence was particularly badly governed and saw a deep stagnation during 1972 and 1984, when standards of living actually fell. There are few countries in the world not engaged in civil war that had as bad a growth record as did post-independence Jamaica. Average income recovered only so much that its real average income is now what it had been around 1975. Overall, the West Indies region saw rather little economic growth in*

91. Niall Ferguson, ‘British Imperialism Revised: The Costs and Benefits of “Anglobalization”’, Development Research Institute Working Paper Series, No. 2, April 2003 (New York: New York University, 2003), pp. 12–13; P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism, 1688–2015*, 3rd edn (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 474; P. J. Cain, ‘Economics and Empire: The Metropolitan Context’, in *Oxford History of the British Empire*, Vol. III, ed. Porter, p. 48, Table 2.6.

92. A. R. Dilley, ‘The Economics of Empire’, in Sarah Stockwell, ed., *The British Empire: Themes and Perspectives* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 103, referring to Cain, ‘Economics and Empire’, p. 48, Table 2.6.

93. Howard Johnson, ‘The British Caribbean from Demobilization to Constitutional Decolonization’, in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, ed. Wm Roger Louis, Vol. IV: ‘The Twentieth Century’, ed. Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 608.

94. *Ibid.*, p. 611.

95. *Ibid.*, p. 612.

96. Leigh Gardner and Tirthankar Roy, *The Economic History of Colonialism* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020).

97. In personal correspondence with the author on 10 July 2024. Reprinted here with Professor Roy’s permission.

the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, when many Asian countries (colonial or not) forged ahead. The reason was bad and corrupt government, not the burden of colonialism.<sup>98</sup>

The economic history of Barbados since 1945, as told by DeLisle Worrell, former Governor of the Central Bank of Barbados, confirms this:

Barbados was transformed from an economy based on export agriculture with poor human development in 1945, to one based on tourism, with an HDI score that puts the country in the top category of human development. Although gains have continued to be made in the years since Independence in 1966, the essential transformation was achieved in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>99</sup>

Since Barbados only became independent in 1966, most of this economic development occurred in the late, postwar colonial period. So, what went wrong afterwards?

Government budgeting was characterised as prudent in the early years of Independence, and the public services demonstrated relatively high productivity. Government savings contributed one-third of capital spending over the period from 1945 to 1980. In stark contrast, the public sector was described in 2016 as overstuffed, poorly skilled and with low productivity. The relaxation of fiscal discipline from the mid-1980s resulted in a balance of payments crisis which required deep economic contraction in 1991, and that pattern was repeated from 2013 to 2018, with another balance of payments crisis in that year.<sup>100</sup>

Between decolonisation in the 1960s and '70s and the present, many causal factors other than the legacy of colonial government have come into play. Those include the agency of the members of independent Caribbean governments. It is reasonable to presume that this helps to explain the fact that different post-colonial states have performed differently. As Banner himself acknowledges, there are “considerable differences between Jamaica, with GDP per capita in 2019 of \$5,500, and Barbados, with GDP per capita of \$18,000 (which is an average for the world)”.<sup>101</sup> Indeed, not only has Barbados achieved the world average in GDP per capita, but, according to World Bank data, in 2020 life expectancy in post-slavery Barbados was 24 years higher than in post-slave-trading Nigeria, literacy (in Barbados in 2014) was almost 40 per cent higher (than in Nigeria in 2018), and Gross National Income per capita in international dollars 482 per cent higher.<sup>102</sup> The story that Michael Banner tells of a basic continuity in equal misery from the era of slavery, via negligent colonial government, to present day economic woes in the Caribbean does not do justice to the data.

98. Personal correspondence.

99. DeLisle Worrell, *Development and Stabilization in Small Open Economies: theories and evidence from Caribbean experience* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023), p. 8.

100. Worrell, *Development and Stabilization*, p. 8.

101. Banner, *Britain's Slavery Debt*, p. 34.

102. [https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report\\_Name=CountryProfile&Id=b450fd57&tbar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=BRB](https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&Id=b450fd57&tbar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=BRB); [https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report\\_Name=CountryProfile&Id=b450fd57&tbar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=NGA](https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&Id=b450fd57&tbar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=NGA); accessed 4 September 2022

## The missing credit column, item 1: the British Empire's anti-slavery campaign

Another vital step in manufacturing the story of basic continuity is the belittling of Britain's use of its dominant imperial power to suppress slave-trading and slavery worldwide throughout the second half of the British Empire's life. Thus, Banner asserts that Britain's "wider antislavery campaign in the next generation seems not so much a break with the past but its continuation by other means".<sup>103</sup> What he means by this is that Britain's vaunted humanitarian motive for suppressing slavery was nothing but an excuse for imperial expansion. Colonialism was simply slavery by other means: "the country which practised and abolished slavery ... then went on to engage in worldwide colonialism".<sup>104</sup>

Here Michael Banner mediates, without any argument, Hilary Beckles' morally cartoonish view that British colonialism was simply wicked. Although some, generally younger historians would agree with him, substantial figures do not. Those who disagree include not only the 'right-wing' Niall Ferguson in his 2003 *Empire*, but also the 'left-wing' Bernard Porter in his 2015 *British Imperial: what the empire wasn't*.<sup>105</sup>

It is not true that slavery-suppression was simply a pretext for colonial expansion. While there were often multiple motives for that expansion, sincere humanitarian ones were certainly among them. The strength of abolitionist feeling in Britain in the early 1800s was so great that it did not relax after Parliament had been persuaded to abolish the slave trade and slavery within the British Empire; it went on to persuade the imperial government to adopt a permanent policy of trying to suppress both the trade and the institution worldwide. One sign of the Empire's enduring commitment was the emergence in the Foreign Office of a separate Slave Trade Department from 1819, which was in fact the Office's largest department in the 1820s and 1830s.<sup>106</sup> The British government's persistence was such that in 1842 the foreign secretary, Lord Aberdeen, saw fit to describe anti-slavery diplomacy as a "new and vast branch of international relations".<sup>107</sup>

In addition to the diplomatic velvet glove, the British also deployed the naval hard fist. The Royal Navy deployed up to 13 per cent of its total manpower in the West Africa Station, in order to stop slave-trading with the Americas.<sup>108</sup> From 1839 naval patrols extended south of the Equator, and in 1845 the Slave Trade Act authorised the Navy to treat as pirates Brazilian ships suspected of carrying slaves, to arrest those responsible and to have them tried in British admiralty courts. In 1850 Navy ships began trespassing into Brazilian territorial waters to accost slave ships, sometimes even entering its harbours and on one occasion exchanging fire with a fort. In September of that year Brazil yielded to the pressure, enacted legislation comprehensively outlawing the slave trade and began to enforce it rigorously. Shortly before his death in 1865 Lord Palmerston, twice prime minister, wrote that "the achievement which I look back on with the greatest and purest pleasure was forcing the Brazilians to give up

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103. Banner, *Britain's Slavery Debt*, p. 30.

104. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

105. Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain made the modern world* (London: Penguin, 2003); Bernard Porter, *British Imperial: What the empire was not* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2015).

106. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, *Slavery in Diplomacy: The Foreign Office and the Suppression of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, History Note No. 17 (London: Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2007), Chapter 2, esp. pp. v, 29 and 46: [https://issuu.com/fcohistorians/docs/history\\_notes\\_cover\\_hphn\\_17](https://issuu.com/fcohistorians/docs/history_notes_cover_hphn_17)

107. Cited by Andrew Porter, "Trusteeship, Anti-Slavery, and Humanitarianism", in *Oxford History of the British Empire*, Vol. III, ed. Porter, p. 211.

108. David Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), Table 2, pp. 92–3.

their slave trade”.<sup>109</sup>

The economic historian David Eltis has reckoned that the suppression of the trans-Atlantic trade alone cost British taxpayers a minimum of £250,000 per annum—which equates to £1.367–1.74 billion, or 9.1–11.5 per cent of the UK’s expenditure on development aid, in 2019—for half a century.<sup>110</sup> Moreover in absolute terms the British spent almost as much attempting to suppress the trade in the forty-seven years, 1816–62, as they received in profits over the same length of time leading up to 1807.<sup>111</sup>

Chaim Kaufmann and Robert Pape took a broader view. In addition to the costs of naval suppression, they considered the loss of business caused by abolition to British manufacturers, shippers, merchants and bankers who dealt with the West Indies. They also factored in the higher prices paid by British consumers for sugar, since duties were imposed to protect free-grown British sugar from competition by foreign producers who continued to benefit from unpaid slave labour. Overall, they “estimate the economic cost to British metropolitan society of the anti-slave trade effort at roughly 1.8 per cent of national income over sixty years from 1808 to 1867”.<sup>112</sup> Although the comparisons are not exact, they do illuminate: in 2021 the UK spent 0.5 per cent of GDP on international aid and just over 2 per cent on national defence. Kaufmann and Pape conclude that Britain’s effort to suppress the Atlantic slave trade (alone) in 1807–67 was “the most expensive example [of costly international moral action] recorded in modern history”.<sup>113</sup>

### The missing credit column, item 2: Christian missionaries’ anti-slavery campaign

It is particularly egregious that the Church Commissioners should have failed to take into account all those Christian missionaries who, following David Livingstone, risked—and sometimes spent—their lives endeavouring to end the slave-trade in Africa. Among them was the Anglican bishop, John Mackenzie, who died horribly of blackwater fever in what is now Mozambique in 1862 at the age of 37.

In a sermon preached in Christ Church Cathedral, Zanzibar on 12 May 2024, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, while acknowledging the missionaries’ fight against slavery, went on to criticise them for treating Africans as inferior and to confess that “we must repent and look at what we did in Zanzibar”.<sup>114</sup> This is very odd, since what the British did in Zanzibar during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was to force the Sultan to end the slave-trade. As for racial prejudice among missionaries, Alexander Chula, who taught in Malawi for three years and recounts his experience in *Goodbye, Dr Banda*, comments thus:

I am curious to know who exactly the former Archbishop had in mind. Mackenzie’s successors gave everything they had to the region, and their graves litter Malawi, still venerated today. They committed to sharing the lives of local peoples and ... approached their cultures with a curiosity and respect

109. Leslie Bethell, *The Abolition of the Brazilian Slave Trade: Britain, Brazil and the Slave Trade Question, 1807–1869* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 360.

110. See Biggar, *Colonialism*, pp. 390–1n.63.

111. Eltis, *Economic Growth*, pp. 96, 97.

112. Chaim D. Kaufmann and Robert A. Pape, ‘Explaining Costly International Moral Action: Britain’s Sixty-Year Campaign against the Atlantic Slave Trade’, *International Organization*, 53/4 (Autumn 1999), pp. 634–7, esp. 636.

113. *Ibid.*, p. 631.

114. ‘Archbishop’s sermon at special reconciliation service in Zanzibar’, 12 May 2024: <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/news/news-and-statements/archbishop-sermon-special-reconciliation-service-zanzibar>

seldom matched by Western visitors today. The imputation that they treated Africans as inferior dishonours men who died precisely because they considered Africans as worthy of that sacrifice as anyone.<sup>115</sup>

Certainly, it dishonours David Livingstone, who wrote as follows in 1871: “I have no prejudice against [the Africans’] colour; indeed, anyone who lives long among them forgets that they are black and feels that they are just fellow men.... If a comparison were instituted, and Manyuema, taken at random, placed opposite say members of the Anthropological Society of London, clad like them in kilts of grass cloth, I should like to take my place among the Manyuema, on the principle of preferring the company of my betters”.<sup>116</sup>

### The distorting motive of ‘anti-racism’

Banner’s case for the justice of slavery-reparations is not driven by a circumspect reading of the relevant history, but rather by anti-racist assumptions. The preface to *Britain’s Slavery Debt* makes clear the author’s conviction that the British are systemically racist and that this racism stems directly from colonialism and its epitome, slavery. Reparations, therefore, are not only about doing justice to the descendants of slaves in the Caribbean; they are also about the British repenting of continuing racism. That explains why, of all peoples, he singles out his own. Banner takes this view mainly because of his own experience. “My personal failing reflects a national failing”, he confesses.<sup>117</sup> In the forty years prior to 2007, in the heart of which the young Michael was growing up, “everyday racism” was “very much the norm”, he tells us, and “ubiquitous”.<sup>118</sup> Enoch Powell—he of the infamous ‘rivers of blood’ speech against mass immigration—“was the most popular politician of his day and was spoken of not as a pariah but as a voice in the wilderness”.<sup>119</sup> Concern about Rhodesia and South Africa was focused “definitely not [upon] the plights of their majorities but of their minorities in staving off majority rule”. And an Iranian friend at a leading public school reported that he was routinely address as a ‘w\*g’.<sup>120</sup>

I cannot speak for Michael Banner and the circles in which he grew up—slightly later than I. And I do not deny that racial prejudice was present in Britain in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But anti-racism was also vigorously present. Powell’s ‘rivers of blood’ speech was immediately and highly controversial and it ended his political career. He was regarded, of course, as both a voice in the wilderness and a pariah by different people. Yes, there was natural concern about what would become of whites in democratised, black majority southern Africa. But at the same time the anti-Apartheid movement in Britain enjoyed considerable public support. Racial prejudice was not as all-pervasive as Banner would have us believe. After all, only five years previously Parliament had passed what became the Race Relations Act 1965, which outlawed racial discrimination. Yes, that implies that there was a racist problem. But it also implies that there was a prevailing anti-racist will to realise a solution.

But whatever the truth about the 1960s and ‘70s, a lot has happened since then. The question of whether Britain today is generally or

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115. Alexander Chula, “In Search of Forgotten Heroes: the Church has consigned to oblivion those who risked all to end the slave trade”, *The Critic*, December 2024-January 2025, p. 47; Alexander Chula, *Goodbye, Dr Banda* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2023).

116. Tim Jeal, *Livingstone*, rev. ed. (New Haven and London: Yale, 2013), p. 354.

117. Banner, *Britain’s Slavery Debt*, p. ix.

118. *Ibid.*, p. x.

119. *Ibid.*, p. x.

120. *Ibid.*, p. xi.

systemically racist is an empirical one and there are strong empirical reasons for doubting it. To begin with, there is the visible fact that in the last Government of Boris Johnson in 2019-22, most of those in charge of the major departments of the British state were headed by Britons of Middle Eastern, Asian, or African heritage: Rishi Sunak, Chancellor; Priti Patel, Home Secretary; Sajid Javid, Health Secretary; Nadhim Zahawi, Education Secretary; and Kwasi Kwarteng, Business Secretary. Kemi Badenoch, a first-generation immigrant from Nigeria, was then Minister of State for Equalities (and is now leader of the Conservative Party). If Britain really were systemically racist, that would not have happened—and especially, it would not have happened under a Conservative Government. White supremacist countries just do not fill the highest offices of state with members of ethnic minorities.

Moreover, the March 2021 ‘Sewell’ report of the UK Government’s Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities—most of whose commissioners were members of ethnic minorities—argued that contemporary Britain is not in fact systemically racist, even if it contains instances of structural racism.<sup>121</sup> Further, the 2018 report of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Being Black in the EU*, found that the prevalence of racist harassment as perceived by people of African descent was lower in the UK than in any EU country except Malta, and the prevalence of overall racial discrimination was the lowest in the UK bar none. It also found that race relations were worst in Austria, Finland, and Ireland—countries with no history of overseas colonisation.<sup>122</sup> Further still, the World Values Survey confirmed this with data collected in 2022, which showed Britain to be one of the least racist countries in the world: only 5 per cent of British respondents objected to having immigrants as neighbours and only 2 per cent to neighbours of a different race—roughly the same as Norway (5 and 3 per cent), Sweden (3 and 1 per cent) and Germany (4 and 3 per cent) and far better than Iran (42 and 28 per cent), Russia (32 and 16 per cent), China (26 and 18 per cent), and Japan (30 and 15 per cent).<sup>123</sup>

Since the available empirical data do not support the assumptions of ‘anti-racism’, quite what motivates it is a question begging for an answer.

### In sum: why the case for reparations does not add up

Michael Banner’s argument, which is the best case yet made for the Church of England’s slavery reparations, does not add up for the following reasons. First, the humiliation and cruelty of British slave-trading and slavery was unique neither in kind nor degree. Many other peoples did similarly lamentable things, not least Africans and Arabs. The racially discriminatory fingering of the British is unfair.

Second, if Britain’s industrial prosperity owes something modest to slave-trading and slavery, it owes a lot more to a wide range of other factors.

Third, the British were among the first peoples in the history of the world to abolish both.

Fourth, they went on to do penance for slavery by spending resources

121. Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, *The Report* (London: HMSO, 2021), pp. 8, 36, 77.

122. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Being Black in the EU: Summary of the Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey* (Vienna: EUIADR, 2019), pp. 2, 3, 7, 9: [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/fra-2019-being-black-in-the-eu-summary\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2019-being-black-in-the-eu-summary_en.pdf) (accessed 23 July 2024).

123. Rob Lowrie, “Survey: UK is one of the least racist countries in the world”, *Unherd*, 27 April 2023: <https://unherd.com/newsroom/survey-uk-is-one-of-the-least-racist-countries-in-the-world/>. This refers to Suzanne Hall et al., *Love thy Neighbour? Public trust and acceptance of the people who live alongside us*, the UK in the World Values Survey (London: Policy Institute at King’s College London, April 2023): <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/love-thy-neighbour.pdf>. It is notable that countries that were formerly part of the British Empire (Britain, United States, Canada, and Australia) performed better than most, and far better than some.

of money, ships, and lives in suppressing slavery worldwide for a century-and-a-half.

Fifth, the British government's decision to pay compensation to slave-owners for their loss of property upon emancipation was made in part as a necessary political compromise to enable the passing of emancipatory legislation, and in part to prevent the economic collapse of plantations, upon which many free blacks would continue to depend for wage-earning employment.

Sixth, it is not true that British emancipation made no beneficial difference at all to the lives of any of the former slaves. Nor is it true that British colonial government did nothing to facilitate economic development and education in the West Indies.

And, seventh, the current economic woes of some Caribbean states owe much to post-colonial mismanagement.

### Reparations and the riotous jungle of history

Of course, the principle that those who have benefited from an injustice should either repair the damage or compensate its victim is moral common sense. The passage of time, however, muddies the waters. As the moral philosopher Onora O'Neill has written:

*claims to compensation have to show that continuing loss or harm resulted from past injury. This is all too often impossible where harms have been caused by ancient or distant wrongs ... Is everybody who descends (in part) from those who were once enslaved or colonised still being harmed by those now ancient and distant misdeeds? Can we offer a clear enough account of the causation of current harms to tell where compensation is owed? Can we show who ought to do the compensating?"*<sup>124</sup>

The riotous jungle of history overgrows and obscures the causal pathways.

In the case of British slavery, the victims themselves are, of course, all long dead and—short of God, an afterlife and a Final Judgement—lie forever beyond the reach of corrective justice and compensation. As for their twenty-first-century descendants, their present condition, while owing something to the enslavement of their ancestors, also owes much to events and choices in the almost two hundred years since emancipation. Were not some of their enslaved ancestors themselves slave-raiders whose luck had turned bad? Are there not some descendants of slaves who now prosper rather more than some descendants of slave-owners? Have not some of the latter used their tainted inheritance for charitable purposes, perhaps even anti-slavery endeavours? And surely many more white people are the descendants, not at all of slave-owners, but rather of those exploited in the mines, factories and mills of the time? In the face of these intractable complications, O'Neill concludes that our focus should lie on addressing present injustices rather than trying to untangle historic injustices: "Compensation is required for present harm caused by past wrongdoing, not simply for current disadvantage however caused. Unless we can trace the causal pathways, we cannot tell who has gained from

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124. Onora O'Neill, 'Rights to Compensation', in *Justice across Boundaries: Whose Obligations?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 51. Sir Noel Malcolm makes a similar argument about the ethical significance of the passage of time in [The Elgin Marbles: Keep, Lend, or Return? An Analysis](#) (London: Policy Exchange, 2023), pp. 40-41:



ancestral wrongdoing, and should now shoulder the costs of compensating those whose present disadvantage was caused by past wrongdoing. It may therefore make more sense ... to argue for a distributive—or redistributive—account of aspects of justice, which seeks action to redress present disadvantage, *whatever its origins*".<sup>125</sup>

So, by all means, if the Church of England has failed in the past to promote members of ethnic minorities to positions that they merited, let it now correct that failure. And let it direct charitable aid toward the British postcolonial Caribbean. But let it not make reparations for historic slavery out of a combination of historical ignorance, ethical naivete, a misplaced sense of racial guilt, and an uncritical deference to 'anti-racist' ideologues.

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125. Ibid., p. 52; the emphases are O'Neill's.

## 3. The Divisiveness of Reparations

Dr Alka Sehgal Cuthbert

At first glance, it is easy to think of the call for Britain today to pay reparations for our nation's past involvement in slave trading and/or owning slaves in West Indian plantation as a straightforward call for justice to be enacted. Justice is invoked not only for past wrongs *per se*, but also for continuing depredations which are alleged to have been caused by past misdeeds. To describe the demand for reparations as divisive can seem at best a little strange, and at worst, an attempt to trivialise the moral horror of slavery. After all, few called reparations to Jewish people, or Britain's reparations to the Kenyan Mau Mau, divisive. The German government's payment of approximately \$86.8 billion in restitution and compensation to survivors of the Holocaust and their heirs in the wake of World War II was seen as necessary and just. Similarly, the British government's payment of £19.9 million to 5,228 Kenyan Mau Mau for their treatment at the hands of British colonial rulers during the Emergency Period between 1952-1963, was also seen as an act of justice. Neither instance of reparations caused social divisions. So why then, in 2024, does the decision to support the call for reparations by the Church of England's leadership cause concern and opposition from some quarters?

Some campaigners for reparations might attribute any resistance to, or even questioning of, reparations as evidence of the deep-seated racism of British history and culture. Their argument is that descendants of slaves continue to be disadvantaged in Britain today. While formal gains in the spheres of anti-discrimination employment law and political rights have been won, campaigners argue that less formal, more difficult to quantify, types of racism continue to exist in our *everyday cultural and linguistic norms*. While no one serious thinks that racism ended in 1834, or indeed with Britain's first Race Relations Act in 1965, most think that claims of systemic or institutional racism require more substantial evidence than anecdotes based on the lived experiences of individuals or of a statistical, single variate disparity between ethnic groups. Especially if these are presented as justifications for major cultural changes or claims on resources, including reparations.

We can agree that formal equality does not necessarily mean substantive equality, but that doesn't render formal equality insignificant either. We

would also agree with the claim that non-white immigrants from Britain's former colonies, whether descendants of slaves or not, have continued to receive less obvious forms of cultural stigmatisation and social discrimination during recent history. But to go from this to the assertion that there has been no substantive moral progress within British society, is unwarranted. Similarly, the assumption that the profits from slavery were the most important causal factor for the development of Britain's Industrial Revolution, is also unwarranted. It entails ignoring historical accounts which provide a far more balanced picture of the different causes of Britain's move to becoming a modern, industrial nation. Once slavery, slave-trading, or colonialism, is accepted as the all-determining factor in Britain's economic and social development, it becomes easier to take a further step and claim that the moral value of every cultural development since then is necessarily limited or tainted by the historical fact of slavery.

#### Divisive Consequences

If we accept that Britain's contemporary moral and cultural norms must inevitably bear the marks of slavery and its attendant racism, then we cannot object to those who say Britain's cultural and social norms must be changed. This is the logic of contemporary social justice politics which motivates, and legitimises, today's call for reparations and the growth of the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion sector. When these tenets of social justice are put into practice with the aim of changing contemporary cultural and social norms, we see the social divisiveness that can follow within our public life and institutions.

For example, in 2022, Don't Divide Us published [a case study](#) on Brighton and Hove Council's Racial Literacy 101 [strategy](#) which was to be offered to all schools within its jurisdiction. There were two major objections to the Council's new strategy. The first was the manner of its introduction. It involved establishing various networks and sub-groups, comprising individuals known to share a similar political view of racism as the council leaders spearheading this new 'anti-racist' strategy. Consultations said to be 'public' turned out to be more like focus groups and the attitude of some councillors supporting the introduction of Racial Literacy 101 towards concerned and critical citizens was less than respectful. The second objection was to its content. A training day held for teachers in the first phase of rolling out Racial Literacy 101, urged them to adopt a Critical Race Theory lens in their practice. This means teaching children that racism consists of 'white supremacy' and that colour-blind approaches are themselves racist. Clearly, in this case, the norms of local democratic accountability, public respectful conduct, and educational standards, were ignored or deemed to be dispensable. In addition, long-established political and social norms of treating people according to their individual conduct (colour-blind anti-racism) were superseded by social justice imperatives to 'change cultural norms'.

This is not to say that cultural norms do not, or should not, change. Social morality in Britain has progressed enormously from the days when

racism marked institutional employment practices, such as [the refusal](#) of the Bristol Omnibus Company to employ black people, for example; or when it was not uncommon to see [signs](#) saying ‘No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs’ in the windows of properties for rent in London. An indication of progress is that, in 2020, Britain fared very well in [a comparative survey](#) with other European nations in terms of the attitudes on the part of ethnic minorities living here today. A recurring theme from other polls and surveys is that a person’s race or ethnicity has never been less of a hinderance to achieving their life goals.

Such progress in social ethics and morality has evolved over time through intentional political action and solidarity, legal changes, and the spontaneous responses of black and white people in Britain who, unlike in America, shared social experiences at work and in public life more widely. Shared, informal cultural norms of everyday life have contributed to greater integration and tolerance that has distinguished British society for the most part of the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century. By contrast, attempts to change the culture today, whether through initiatives such as the Church of England’s report *From Lament to Action*, or instigating funds for Healing, Repair and Justice, or Brighton and Hove’s Racial Literacy 101 strategy, are top down initiatives that lack sufficient democratic consent. This is why we argue that deriving the ethical basis for public and institutional norms of conduct from the politics of social justice rather than universal moral values can only be divisive. When this is combined with a radical moral attack on Britain’s cultural and historical achievements, division can only become more deeply entrenched.

### A Truncated History

Another objection we have is that the political and moral assumptions underpinning the Church of England’s argument are based on a truncated history. It is sometimes argued that the fact that the British government paid slave-owners to ensure the abolition of the slave-trade was passed in 1807 is proof of racism. It is inferred that the motives of British abolitionists, including William Wilberforce, could *only* be purely self-interested. But even if granted, it is a leap to assume that racism exhausts all meanings and motivations. Religious belief and a disposition to care may have also played a part. The fact that Wilberforce presented a bill for abolition in Parliament every year from 1791 to 1806 indicates something of his determination to see slavery abolished. So, perhaps it is not surprising if he agreed to pay for losses to slave-owners in order to ensure the bill passed in Parliament. Such histories also omit, or casually dismiss, the significant costs, in both money and lives lost, undertaken by the UK post-abolition during its multi-decade campaign to eradicate both the slave-trade and slavery, in particular through the work of the West Africa Squadron. To acknowledge this does not entail minimising the moral outrage that slavery undoubtedly represents: it does however mean acknowledging that others in the past could share a similar moral disgust (which could, in principle, co-exist with political or economic

self-interest).

The lens of social or racial justice purports to be on the side of the oppressed, but it adopts a history from above approach that tells only half the story. One crucial oversight is the fact that abolition of slavery was a popular cause with mass support. It was not the preserve of the political elite alone. In this it contrasts with today's campaigns for reparations or social justice whose support base is largely rooted in the professional managerial class and cultural elites. In 1863, the Manchester Guardian's defence of the Confederate's secession, or 'the slave-owners revolt', was met by a [massive protest](#) by local anti-slavery campaigners outside the paper's offices on New Year's Eve. A year earlier millworkers had met at Manchester Free Trade Hall to oppose instructions from mill owners, and the Manchester Guardian, who were urging them to end their support of Lincoln's blockade of cotton harvested by US slaves. The millworkers continued to support the embargo even though it meant their own livelihoods would be further jeopardised because Lancashire mills relied heavily on imported US cotton.

This inspiring act of solidarity was [acknowledged](#) by Lincoln at the time, but, strangely, is rarely mentioned by today's advocates of reparative justice and hardly features in curriculum content for Black History Month. Frederick Douglass was born into slavery but through a combination of his own determined efforts and solidarity of abolitionists in the US and Britain, he became a free man and an inspirational public intellectual. On publication of his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* in 1845, friends advised him that it would be prudent to take a trip abroad for a while. He decided to visit Britain. In 1846 he [spoke](#) at a public event in Rochdale where the audience included millworkers, members of the recently formed Co-op, non-Conformist churches and the MP John Bright. He so impressed people that Ellen Richardson, a Quaker from Newcastle, undertook fundraising to pay for Douglass' manumission. Hence, Douglass said at a meeting before his return to the US in 1847, 'I came here a slave, but I go back free'.

Considering Britain's more recent history, David Holland's [book](#) *Imperial Heartland: Immigration, working class culture and everyday tolerance 1917-1947* charts the lives of South Asians from modern-day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh who settled here in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the assistance of working-class British people. During the Second World War when black GIs were stationed in Britain, we know that many ordinary British people opposed the segregation imposed by the United States military. The British political elite pondered on how to square the need to not upset the Americans with an instinct that some in Britain would not like the unfamiliar and unethical practice of segregation. No doubt they also had an eye to feelings among people in the colonies and potential for reputational damage. But meanwhile, many black GIs [found](#) an easy tolerance among many ordinary British people, [memories](#) of which some [took back](#) with them to an America where the struggle for civil rights was developing.

Such events point to the complexity of history where the [racist murder](#) of Charles Wotten in 1919 coexists with solidarity across ethnic lines. This incident is used by Reni Eddo-Lodge as a jumping point for her poetic speculations in her book, entitled, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, published in 2018 but which topped the best sellers list in the wake of George Floyd's murder in 2020. Eddo Lodge's work is testimony to her literary talents more than her concern for historical analysis. The version of Britain's history presented by her, and others who share her view of racism, has little or no place for the often overlooked history from below and its more generous space afforded to ordinary people.

Apart from being weak in terms of historical explanatory power, history mobilised for social justice causes is likely to divide. While not everyone will be a historian, many people will have their own family histories which are likely to be unrecognisable in the versions of today's 'anti-racist' campaigners. If endorsed, the current call for reparations diminishes the scope for a shared history which need not preclude personal histories which are unique to individuals. But if the latter are not located within the former, any common ground is weakened. When the main interpretative lens being promoted through all major public institutions is that of race, itself a conceptual category that divides humans into hierarchies, it is not surprising that one consequence will be to entrench divisions along racial and ethnic lines and make integration of newcomers all the more difficult.

### Divisive Consequences

Beyond the reparations debate, we can see similar divisive claims in demands from institutional élites for public apologies, top-down celebration of 'Diversity and Inclusion', and the emergence of positive action schemes. All too often, such initiatives end in creating oversensitivity to racial or ethnic differences, and even, segregation in some cases. Parents have provided examples from their children's schools which suggest that policies similar to Brighton and Hove's Racial Literacy 101 are informing both classroom and school practice, the curriculum, and also the Continuing Professional Development offered to teachers. Some have told us that their questions regarding the decolonisation of the curriculum have been ignored. Some have reported that after a day of racial awareness training, they feel they can no longer address long time colleagues in the same 'racially innocent' way.<sup>126</sup> Current calls for reparations and calls for positive action initiatives rely on the same logic of oppressor/oppressed narratives. They also require a hostile orientation to Britain's past historical and cultural achievements which are alleged to be the primary cause of present day problems. Ameliorating such problems, it is asserted, requires race-specific action or initiatives which range from the toppling of statues, or in less dramatic form, the overhaul of books studied in schools to replace past knowledge with a focus on skills and more diverse representation in keeping with modern Britain. The past becomes not only another country, but a morally reprobate country too: something to be approached with extreme caution, 'armed' with suitable 'decolonising', 'white supremacy' detecting skills.

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126. Some illustrative examples: <https://dontdivideus.com/2023/09/06/a-secondary-school-teachers-experience-of-anti-racism> ; <https://dontdivideus.com/2023/04/12/letter-from-a-concerned-grandmother/> <https://dontdivideus.com/2023/03/27/a-primary-teachers-experience-of-anti-racist-training/>

This is hardly the open-minded approach needed to the study of anything, let alone history; nor does it provide sufficient justification for institutions to make important changes to ethos and practice.

Many people find it hard to speak freely, to question or to raise criticisms about demands made in the name of social justice. Often it is because they fear the consequences of being labelled as racist. The fact that racism is still seen as something so morally reprehensible suggests that, contrary to the assertions of social justice advocates, British society is not organised around racist ideas. Social stigma about racism is different from self-censorship. It is different from opposing the imposition of new definitions of racism, and by definition, of racists, encouraging fear of formal and/or informal total ostracization (aka 'zero tolerance'). The first situation is compatible with democracy, the second is not. Few seem to consider what the social consequences might be when a society's leading institutions not only accept the idea of Britain's history and culture being so irredeemably flawed, but also seem reluctant or even hostile to democratic scrutiny and conduct. What is likely to happen when the ethos of our institutions becomes increasingly out of kilter with the cultural and moral norms of most citizens?

In Policy Exchange's recent [report](#), *A Portrait of Modern Britain*, results from polling of respondents from minority as well as majority ethnic groups found that 72% thought that children should be taught to be proud of their history. The abolition of slavery was one of the things, alongside the Magna Carta, the Industrial Revolution and Britain's role in two world wars, of which they were proud. These findings sit uneasily with the negative national narrative that underlies calls for reparations. Unlike the 19<sup>th</sup> century movement for the abolition of slavery, today's demands for reparations lack widespread or popular support. They express the interests of an elite minority of institutional leaders, including those in the Church of England, who are to be distinguished from the majority of people who work in them, use their services, or are ordinary clergy and parishioners. Calls for reparations may be supported by international bodies like CARICOM, but among British citizens, a You Gov poll from 2014 indicates [little or no](#) support. In this respect, calls for reparations are fundamentally anti-democratic. Opinion may have shifted since 2014, but it remains the case that there is no mass movement calling for reparations.

#### The Moral Loss

The strategies and discourses engendered by the politics of social justice reify ethnic or racial identities at the expense of a belief in universal humanity. There is an important loss involved in the rejection of the universal ideal of moral equality, which was most clearly elaborated in Enlightenment philosophy. If the assertions behind the Church of England's decision to launch funds for 'Healing, Repair and Justice' are accepted, it means that the plane of moral equality ceases to exist: it gives way to the imperatives of a narrow conception of social justice. The world-view which arises from the ideal of social justice stipulates that those from

formerly colonised or enslaved nations must forever be in a position of supplication and dependency on their former colonisers or enslavers. Conversely, the latter can only remain in their superior position of power. Their only way to gain some moral standing or forgiveness is to be a more financially generous oppressor and adopt positions of self-abnegation in relation to Britain's existing normative beliefs which are assumed to be oppressive. A diet of redistribution and anti-patriotism will not help foster the kind of citizenship we will need today.

Temporally, pro-reparations arguments keep us looking backwards, thereby missing what has changed today: the argument hinders us from considering whether yesterday's political and social problems are really the same as today's. Those proposing the legitimacy of reparations today wish to present their claims as arising from superior knowledge and a more enlightened morality. They often call upon the authority of 'lived experience' which is offered up as, or instead of, reasoned evidence. But 'lived experience' is not the alpha and omega of reliability. Arguments based on this concept often lack, or intentionally reject, established methodological norms of ascertaining the truth value of statements. The result of this anti-epistemology encourages a defensive, often extremely hostile, reaction to any challenge as witnessed in the response of the 'anti-racist' lobby to the government commissioned Commission of Racial and Ethnic Disparities report. The report reminded us of the need for more robust evidence before accepting allegations of systematic racism, hardly the egregious denialism its detractors alleged. Over-reliance on lived experience and single variate statistical disparities limits the truth-seeking capacity of social justice ideology: and truth is something in which most of us believe, even if it is difficult to ascertain.

Until recent times, Britain's legal and institutional norms have been predicated on three universal moral values articulated in Enlightenment philosophy: equality, freedom and tolerance which have come to shape our everyday social and cultural norms. If the belief in universal moral equality, with its possibility of transcending the determinations of history and society, is replaced by a political framework of social justice in which the best on offer is a redistribution of goods in terms of money and cultural status, we remain *morally divided*. If nations cannot meet on the world stage as equal in status despite a range of disparities of socio-economic power and institutional status, the world remains *morally divided*. Today's call for Britain to pay reparations is inherently divisive for these reasons.

As a system of loosely connected beliefs, we could say that social justice does not, by definition, require empirical proof or logical reasoning. Like other belief systems, including Christianity, it requires faith. However, Christian belief belongs to a centuries old tradition and has a developed theology. Christian beliefs are something individuals accept through their own volition and draw upon for precepts for living. In principle, Christianity recognises the fundamental unity and moral equality of humanity. In contrast, the beliefs of social justice shatter this universal moral plane and encourages us to scabble around for status and goods by



virtue of claimed victimhood: equality and merit have little place.

Society is, by default, historical and contingent. It is open to changes arising from the intentional and unintentional exertion of human agency: and British society has changed. Consequently, when advocates of social justice claim racism runs through British history and society like the writing on a stick of rock, they are making a statement negating historical change, and by extension, human agency. They cannot account for social change so their only recourse is to negate or minimise it. In this pessimistic scenario, the further extension and deepening of equality, both domestically and internationally, cannot be countenanced. Instead, we are urged to accept reparations, or positive action based on racial or ethnic identity, as compensatory tokens which, in effect, legitimise the status quo in terms of underlying relationships of power (between government/state and citizens).

Supporters of social justice ideology lack the moral imagination to consider the possibility that the unintended consequences of failing to commit to universal moral values could unleash a divisive dynamic which is likely to leave most of us culturally and politically impoverished, wherever we may stand on some abstract matrix of power. Not all divisions are harmful or morally bad. But when the political interests of a radical political minority are untampered by commitment to universal morality, it is easy for believers of social justice ideology to overstep their remit and impose their vision of what society's moral beliefs should be.

When the main message is that virtue and vice track skin colour rather than individual agency and intentionality, the results can only strengthen anti-democratic practices which divide us along lines of race. Worryingly, what we see in the calls for reparations today is not a call for justice to be applied, but the opposite. To accept the claims of the reparations lobby is to entrench the principle of injustice, or at least of partial justice. It is to entrench a vision of ourselves as fundamentally unequal and as such, represents a backwards step politically and morally.



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