



PRESS RELEASE

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Chairman of CARICOM Reparations Commission addresses British House of Commons

(CARICOM Secretariat, Turkeyen, Greater Georgetown, Guyana) Chairman of the CARICOM Reparations Commission Professor Sir Hilary Beckles, in a presentation to the British House of Commons on 16 July 2014, expressed the view that the reparations process will bring honour and dignity to the people of the Caribbean as well as the people of Great Britain and Europe. He also predicted that “this 21st Century will be the century of global reparatory justice.”

The Chairman of the Commission outlined the injustices of slavery and the genocide that occurred as a result of European expansion and stated that the government of Great Britain and other European governments that benefitted from slavery and colonialism “have a case to answer to in respect of reparatory justice.” Sir Hilary asked the government to respond with humility and openness when they receive a request for dialogue on the issue of reparations from Caribbean Governments. He further urged the Parliament to take decisive action to correct “the terrible wrongs of the past.”

In discussing the legacy of slavery and colonial rule, Sir Hilary said the CARICOM governments “these past 50 years have been cleaning up the mess left behind by Britain’s colonial legacy”. He said Britain and its Parliament, could not morally and legally turn their back upon this past and walk away from the mess they have left behind. “This Parliament has to return to the scene of its crimes, and participate as a legitimate parliament, as a legal parliament, in the healing and rehabilitation of the Caribbean” Sir Hilary said.

“May the values and the spirit of development cooperation and mutual respect guide us all,” he concluded, to a standing ovation from the Parliament.

The issue of Reparations has been high on the agenda for the CARICOM Heads of Government. During a press conference following their Inter-sessional meeting in March this year, then Chairman, Hon. Dr. Ralph Gonsalves, Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, announced that the Caribbean Reparatory Justice Programme (CRJP) was accepted by the CARICOM Heads of government as a basis for discussions on reparations. The CRJP is part of a strategic and operational plan prepared by the Regional Reparations Commission consisting of ten points that need to be addressed.

At the recently concluded Thirty-Fifth Conference of Heads of Government, held in Antigua and Barbuda 1-4 July 2014, the CARICOM Heads agreed to dispatch a Draft Notice of Complaint under cover of a letter from the Chair of the Prime Ministerial Sub-Committee (PMSC) on Reparations, the Rt. Hon. Freundel Stuart, Prime Minister of Barbados, to the relevant European Governments, with a request that a Conference be held on the issue.

The full text of Professor Sir Hilary Beckles’ address to the House of Commons, Parliament of Great Britain follows:

ADDRESS DELIVERED BY PROFESSOR SIR HILARY BECKLES, CHAIRMAN OF THE CARICOM REPARATIONS COMMISSION, HOUSE OF COMMONS, PARLIAMENT OF GREAT BRITAIN, COMMITTEE ROOM 14, THURSDAY, JULY 16, 2014, 9:00 P.M.

Madam Chair, the distinguished member of Parliament for Hackney North and Stoke Newington, Diane Abbott, other distinguished members of the House of Lords, and House of Commons, Excellencies of the Diplomatic Corp, colleagues at the head table, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I speak this evening, in this honourable chamber of the House of Commons, as Chairman of the Caricom Commission on Reparations. My colleagues of the Commission are tasked with the preparation and presentation of the evidentiary basis for a contemporary truth: that the Government of Great Britain, and other European states that were the beneficiaries of enrichment from the enslavement of African peoples, the genocide of indigenous communities, and the deceptive breach of contract and trust in respect of Indians and other Asians brought to the plantations under indenture, have a case to answer in respect of reparatory justice.

The case of genocide is not only in respect of our decimated native community. It is also important to recognize the genocidal aspect of chattel slavery in the Caribbean.

British slave ships brought 5.5 million enslaved Africans into their Caribbean colonies over 180 years.

When slavery was abolished in 1838 they were just 800,000 persons remaining. That is, a retention/survival rate of 15%.

The regime of enslavement was crafted by policies and attitudes that were clearly genocidal.

Jamaica received 1.5 million Africans. Only 300,000 remained at Emancipation (20%).

Barbados received 600,000 Africans. Only 83,000 remained at Emancipation (14%).

This case is for the Caricom governments to present on behalf of its citizens. I am sure that in its presentation there will be due regard for the principles of diplomacy and development cooperation - for which they have long distinguished themselves. This process will bring honour and dignity to the people of the Caribbean as well as to the people of Great Britain and Europe.

Caricom governments, like the government of Great Britain, represent nations that are independent and equal. As such, they should proceed on the basis of their legitimate equality, without fear of retribution, in the best interest of humanity, and for a better future for us all.

I am honoured to be asked to speak in this historic parliament of the people of Great Britain. Like you I am aware that this Parliament prepared the official political basis of the crimes that defined the colonial past. It is here, in this House, that the evil system of slavery, and genocide, were established. This House passed laws, framed fiscal policies, and enforced the crimes that have produced harmful legacies and persistent suffering now in need of repair.

This House also made emancipation from slavery and independence from colonialism an empowering reality. It is in here, we now imagine, that laws for reparatory justice can be conceptualized and implemented. It is in here, we believe, that the terrible wrongs of the past can be corrected, and humanity finally and truthfully liberated from the shame and guilt that have followed these historical crimes.

We must believe in the corrective power of this Parliament to respond positively to this present challenge, and in the process free itself from the bondage of its own sins and crimes. Without this belief our journey here this evening would be lacking integrity, and without a doubt, would be a useless exercise.

But I speak in this honourable House this evening, not only as chairman of a rightfully constituted commission that is peopled by some of our finest Caribbean citizens, and who have been selected by our distinguished Presidents and Prime Ministers, but as a Caribbean person with an affinity for this country. I was raised and educated here. I came from the

Caribbean to this country as a child; I grew to maturity here; and was educated here in a fine university that has distinguished itself in the Liberal-Progressive pedagogy of the nation.

Great Britain, therefore, is my second home and I care for it as I care for my first home, the Great Caribbean. I wish for Great Britain, as I do for the Great Caribbean, peace and prosperity. I wish that their shared past, painful though it has been, will be transformed into a moral force of mutual respect and development cooperation.

It is for these reasons that I have joined the Caribbean and global movement for reparatory justice. I believe we can settle this case within the context of diplomatic initiatives that are consistent with our status as equal nations.

The crimes committed against the indigenous, African, and Asian peoples of the Caribbean are well documented. We know of the 250 years of slave trading, chattel slavery, and the following 100 years of colonial oppression.

Slavery was ended in 1838, only to be replaced by a century of racial apartheid, including the denigration of Asian people. Indigenous genocide, African chattel slavery and genocide, and Asian contract slavery, were three acts of a single play – a single process by which the British state forcefully extracted wealth from the Caribbean resulting in its persistent, endemic poverty.

I wish to comment, as a result, on the 1833 Act of Emancipation, and how this august Parliament betrayed the enslaved people of the Caribbean by forcing them to pay more than 50% of the cost of their own emancipation. This is an aspect of the history long hidden from public view.

We know, for example, that this Parliament in 1833 determined that the 800,000 enslaved people in the Caribbean were worth, as chattel property, £47 million. This was their assessed market value.

We know that this Parliament determined that all slave owners should receive just and fair compensation for the official taking away of their property.

We know that this Parliament provided the sum of £20 million in grants to the slave owners as fair compensation for the loss of their human chattel.

And we know that this Parliament determined that the enslaved people would receive none of this compensation. The argument made in this House was that ‘property’ cannot receive property compensation. This Parliament, in its emancipation Act, upheld the law that black people were not human, but property.

What this Parliament has hid from the world is that it also determined that the remaining £27 million would be paid by the enslaved people to their enslavers, by means of a 4 year period of free labour called the Apprenticeship.

This period of additional free labour by the emancipated represented the enforced extraction of £27 million by the state. It was a cruel and shameful method of legislating Emancipation by forcing the enslaved to pay more than 50% of the financial cost of their own freedom. The £20 million paid the enslavers by this Parliament was less than the £27 million paid by the enslaved to the enslavers as dictated by this House.

I wish now to engage the argument of the British Government that the slavery and other colonial crimes were ‘legal’, and that they took place ‘a long time ago’, and are beyond the border of adjudication.

Allow me, madam Chair, to breach protocol and to interject myself into the discourse, in order to demonstrate how very contemporary and current this exploitation of the Caribbean people is and has been.

Upstairs this chamber sits the Earl of Harewood. He is an honourable member of the House of Lords. But does Lord Harewood know that my grandfather after Independence in Barbados in 1966 labored on this sugar plantation, as did his father and forefathers, going back to the days of slavery? Does the goodly Lord know that as a child I took lunch for my grandfather into the canefields of his sugar plantation? Lord Harewood, and my family, go back a long way, from slavery right into the present.

Take also the very aristocratic and very distinguished Cumberbatch family. It has now produced the brilliant young actor, Benedict Cumberbatch [who I would love to meet one day]. Benedict's grandfather owned the estate on which my beloved great grandmother worked all her adult life. They enslaved my family on their Cleland plantation in the parish of St. Andrew. My great grandmother, who helped to raise me, and who we all called 'mammy', carried the name Adriana Cumberbatch. The actor and academic are joined therefore by a common past and present, and maybe, common blood!

My case is but one of ten thousand such cases. Everywhere across the Caribbean the presence of our enslavers can be identified in our daily domestic lives. This history is not remote. It is alive and pressing upon our daily affairs.

And what have our people and governments been doing with respect to this legacy since we have gained national independence? The truth is, the people of the Caribbean have been very courageous in their effort at self-development and self-help in respect of this terrible history and enduring legacy.

Our citizens have faced this past head on, and have established a vibrant culture of community self-help and sustainable regional development mobilization. We are not beggars! We are not subservient! We do not want charity and handouts! We want justice! Reparatory justice!

When all is said and done, our governments these past 50 years have been cleaning up the mess left behind by Britain's colonial legacy. Our finest Presidents and Prime Ministers have been devising projects to clean up the awful mess inherited from slavery and colonization. They must be commended for this effort, but the fact is, this legacy of rubble and ruin, persistent poverty, and racialised relations and reasoning, that continues to cripple our best efforts, has been daunting.

Britain, and its Parliament, cannot morally and legally turn their back upon this past, and walk away from the mess they have left behind. This Parliament has to return to the scene of its crimes, and participate as a legitimate parliament, as a legal parliament, in the healing and rehabilitation of the Caribbean.

We cannot, and should not, be asked to do this by ourselves. We have done our part. This Parliament must now return, and do its part, within the context of reparatory justice, and within the framework of development cooperation.

I wish to give two examples of how this reparatory justice can work:

(1) Jamaica, Britain's largest slave colony, was left with 80% black functional illiteracy at Independence in 1962. From this circumstance the great and courageous Jamaican nation has struggled with development and poverty alleviation. The deep crisis remains. This Parliament owes the people of Jamaica an educational and human resource investment initiative.

(2) Barbados, Britain's first slave society, is now called the amputation capitol of the world. It is here that the stress profile of slavery and racial apartheid; dietary disaster and psychological trauma; and the addiction to the consumption of sugar and salt, have reached the highest peak. The country is now host to the world's most virulent diabetes and hypertension epidemic. This Parliament owes the people of Barbados an education and health initiative.

It is the same for all our countries; the Bahamas, the Leewards, the Windwards, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Belize, and beyond.

The Caricom Ten Point Plan for Reparatory Justice addresses these development issues that are central to the case Britain has to answer.

It is an invitation to Great Britain to demonstrate leadership within the legal, moral, and diplomatic culture of the world, within the Commonwealth, and within its relations the Caribbean.

There can be no escaping the importance of this exchange of views about the matter before this honourable chamber tonight.

It took all of the 19th century to uproot slavery from the Caribbean; from Haiti in 1804 to the Spanish sub-region in the 1880s. It took another 100 years to create citizenship, nationhood,

and democracy across the Caribbean as a development framework. We have helped ourselves.

This 21st century will be the century of global reparatory justice. Citizens are now, for the first time since they were driven into retreat by colonialism, able to stand up for reparatory justice without fear. Their claim, their just claim for reparations, will not go away. Rather, like the waves upon our beautiful shores, they will keep coming until reparatory justice is attained.

Madam Chair, we call upon you, and all members of this House, to rise to this challenge and to assist Great Britain to be truly worthy of the title “Great”. I urge you to do the right thing, in the right way. There is no other right time, other than right now, in our time. There is so much to gain from your leadership. The Caribbean is counting on you.

In 1823, the honourable Thomas Buxton, M.P. for Weymouth and Melcombe Regis, presented a bill to this House calling for an Emancipation Act with compensation for the enslaved people. His bill and vision were defeated. Instead, ten years later, an emancipation bill was passed, not with compensation for the enslaved, but with handsome and generous compensation for enslavers. Some 40% of the national expenditure of the country was handed over to slave-owners as reparations.

The enslaved people of the Caribbean got nothing. Indeed, they were then called upon by the said Emancipation Act to give £27 million in free labour to their enslavers. The injustice and the cruelty of that Emancipation Act, remain today like a fish bone stuck in our throats.

We urge you, madam Chair, and other members of this Parliament, to rise up and bring the Buxton vision to life. He was a noble warrior for reparatory justice; his spirit can return to this House, in both places, and the 21st century will be ours to forge a new moral order for our collective wellbeing.

On behalf of the Caricom Reparations Commission, all my colleagues across the Caribbean who have worked with our governments in order to bring this case before you, I ask that you respond with humility and openness when your government receives an invitation to meet with our governments in summit in order to discuss this matter.

May the values and the spirit of development cooperation and mutual respect guide us all.

Thank you madam Chair.

(Standing Ovation)