



OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

by Rahym Augustin-Joseph

Prime Minister Sunak's 'No' to Reparations Should Cause a Response of Yes within the Caribbean

The recent 'No' by the British Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, when asked by a member of the House of Commons on the anniversary of the death of Bernie Grant, founder of the Reparations Movement in the UK, whether he would provide a sincere apology and commit to Reparatory Justice because of Britain's role in enslavement, colonialism, and native genocide of African peoples should not be viewed as a spoke in the ever-rolling wheel towards reparatory justice. There must always be optimism about the will, even amidst the pessimism of the intellect as Gramsci reminds us.

While Sunak's response was one of the most 'unpolished' and 'undiplomatic' rejections by a British Prime Minister, especially as subjects like Reparations are meted with deflections and 'looking to the future narratives', it is difficult to forget the statements of former British Prime Minister, David Cameron in Jamaica, who while acknowledging slavery was abhorrent, fell short of an apology and provided 'reparations' in the form of building of a new prison. This therefore only makes Sunak's response, one in a long line of responses from British Prime Ministers.

What was ironic and hypocritical was when Cameron took praise for Britain leading the way to abolition, without acknowledging their substantial role in its continued success. It was and seems to be typical of the continuous colonial mindset of the British political elite, though, as they believed that formerly enslaved people needed to be colonised to be taught the virtues of civilisation and freedom. Once that was successful and they were 'Westminster choirboys' or 'Mimic Men', they should be beholden for the kind gesture. Eric Williams illuminated for the Caribbean, however, that the raison d'être of the abolition of slavery was the unprofitability of the system and not the benevolence of abolitionists like Wilberforce, among others.

Therefore, Sunak is only but one in the long line of morally bankrupt and uncourageous leaders who have covered and failed to acknowledge his country's role in the slave trade, and have shied away from their moral, ethical, and legal responsibility to correct their wrongs of the past.

However, those in the vineyard of Reparatory Justice should not be discouraged. Instead, they must use this as an opportunity to strengthen their movement's philosophy, engage in activism, rally support from ordinary people, NGOs, CSOs, through education and continue to build a programmatic agenda. The core message of the movement should always be premised upon the fact that Britain must repair the damage caused by colonisation, enslavement, and native genocide of people of African descent.

Case for Reparatory Justice

Ship records have reminded us that millions of people were transported as slaves from Africa to the Americas and Caribbean, and many more died during the voyage. Blacks, for hundreds of years, did not enjoy basic rights such as the right to life, suitable working conditions, and the right to trial among others, and they were regarded as simply being human property.

During Emancipation in 1833, however, the British provided reparations to the equivalent

of £17bn to be paid to 46,000 of Britain's slave-owners for 'loss of human property.' The University College of London has compiled an extensive database of those compensated, which includes former members of the British political and economic elite. Therefore, much of this compensation has contributed towards the development and economic prowess of the modern British state and the British West Indies was the wealth-generating machine for the British.

One would believe that those who were truly owed reparations — formerly enslaved — would be the beneficiaries, as they were the ones that they were stripped of their humanity. Reparations for the formerly enslaved would ensure the economic enfranchisement needed for a life post-plantation.

Sir Hilary Beckles, the foremost champion of Reparatory Justice and Vice Chancellor of the UWI, has reminded us in Britain's Black Debt that "Afro-Caribbean people suffered four hundred years of criminal racial targeting within slavery regimes. The living legacy of these crimes continues to debilitate their progeny while those who have benefited from the criminal enrichment continue to enjoy the wealth derived from the crimes. The native population of the region experienced the crime of genocide in addition to enslavement and to not present this case constitutes an act of neglect and irresponsibility which will be judged by history as connivance and complicity."

Therefore, the case for Reparatory Justice against countries like the United Kingdom comes on the basis of not only the extraction of wealth from the Americas and the Caribbean which were re-routed and utilised for British industrial acumen, but because, according to the CARICOM Reparations Commission, "the British were owners and traders of enslaved Africans which instructed genocidal action upon the indigenous community, they created and enforced the legal, financial and fiscal environment necessary for enslavement, defined and enforced enslavement as national imperatives, refused compensation to the enslaved post-emancipation while compensating slave owners, and have refused to acknowledge such crimes or to compensate victims and their descendants."

Therefore, when Sunak notes that, "the focus of the British Government must be to understand the history in all parts, and not running away from it, but making sure that we have a society that is inclusive and tolerant of people from all backgrounds, as trying to unpick our history is not the right way forward and is not something we will focus our energies on," he is essentially ignoring that the pillaging of the resources has caused monumental developmental challenges for the Americas and the Caribbean of which reparatory justice can provide solutions towards.

Among other things, the requirement of a full apology for the alive descendants and the future generations, because of the atrocities of the British, would continue the healing process within the Americas and the Caribbean. The apology would be the British accepting responsibility for their actions, committing to non-repetition, and pledging to repair the harm caused during enslavement.



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The continued statement of regret which falls short of an apology continues to be the preferred path for the British because, in apologising, it would automatically kick-start an obligation for reparations, as one cannot say 'sorry' for their genocidal actions but take no action to attempt to repair the damage. Therefore, an apology has the potential to transform the entire global financial architecture, which has benefited from the enslavement of black people and would unlock a complex process, as most of the beneficiaries continue to reap rewards from their engagement with colonialism.

Further, Reparatory Justice would also ensure, as continually lamented by the CARICOM Reparations Commission, that a framework for the return of cultural heritage as there has been a significant knowledge gap in the Caribbean wherein the history of our ancestors and our ability to appreciate culture prior to European colonisation has been erased. Therefore, Reparatory Justice, as the Commission has noted, will include the creation of museums, research centres, and a transformation of our education system to ensure that our people have access to the information which continually exists exclusively within European institutions.

Reparatory Justice will also allow for the fiscal and monetary legroom required to provide quality healthcare for the Americas and the Caribbean recognising that as the CARICOM Reparations Commission has stated "part of the reason for the Caribbean having the highest incidence of chronic diseases in the world is because of the nutritional experience, physical and emotional brutality, and the overall stress profile associated with 400 years of enslavement." These dietary preferences or obligations have transmitted an inter-generational tendency for hypertension and therefore this has devastating consequences for a health care system that has deliberately been made inadequate by European colonisers. To provide quality healthcare, there is an additional burden on states that they cannot overcome on their own. There needs to be the injecting of capital, technical resources, science, and technology, among other support mechanisms, by the developed world.

The extraction of wealth from the Americas and the Caribbean during enslavement and post-emancipation has caused widespread poverty and the inability of states to finance their societal and developmental aspirations without significant levels of borrowing. States are therefore trapped in a debt cycle with strict Western conditionalities which are often imposed without the history or contemporary circumstances of the borrowing state in mind. Former colonisers must therefore provide support for its payment, cancel some of the international debt and provide monetary payments where appropriate.

Reparatory Justice must also be premised upon the need to address massive illiteracy, a broken education system which prioritises rote learning, and memorisation among other British imposed elements, while structurally discriminating against those of lower socio-economic brackets.

Response to the critics

There are critics of and even among the movement, who will probably interpret the 'No' by the Prime Minister as an opportunity to

belabour the inaccurate yet repeated opinion that, "slavery is done, and we should move on and that the Prime Minister has put the final nail in the coffin and therefore the Caribbean should rewrite its own historical past on its own."

One must only look at the Dutch apology or the reparations paid to the Germans after the holocaust for hope and precedents. Also, there are some among our population who have grandparents and great-grandparents who were enslaved and therefore it is within living memory. Moreover, the International Criminal Court has reminded us that crimes against humanity of which enslavement is, also do not have a statute of limitation to preclude an action against states. It is important to also dispense with the notion that the ratification of enslavement by the British parliament therefore made it legal; the enslavement of people, genocide among other atrocities can never be 'legal' irrespective of its safe passage during parliament.

Reparatory Justice should also not be viewed solely from narrow economic prisms, but as a moral, ethical, and legal requirement which can aid the ailing economies and societies of the Caribbean. Many seem to be overly concerned with the dispersing of the monies to the already 'corrupt' Caribbean governments as if there aren't other sectors and agencies within the Caribbean states such as NGOs, CSOs, and youth organisations among others who can and will efficiently and honestly utilise the resources. It is also an anti-intellectual response to note that those who are due reparations should not benefit because they may utilise it for corrupt purposes, when the better response would be to continue to further build institutions which can reduce corruption while fighting for reparatory justice.

Moreover, all the facets of reparations are not measured within economic measurements, but they also touch the soul, hearts, and culture of the Caribbean people, who have been raptured during the enslavement experience.

Therefore, Prime Minister Sunak's 'No' and other comments, are rooted in the failure of Britain to address its role in enslavement and their continued attempt to liken the ability to transform their society as the panacea for resolving the historical injustices of the entire world. However, there is no freedom and justice in the world if people of African descent who have been historically marginalised are not provided with reparatory justice as a legal, ethical, and moral necessity. Those who labour in this vanguard need not have the pessimism of the intellect but the optimism of the will. Prime Minister Sunak's 'No' should cause a clarion call of Yes among Caribbean progressives.

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