

TONY BLAIR TALKS CANDIDLY ABOUT BRITAIN'S ROLE IN

'THE SHAME OF SLAVERY'

Prime Minister writes for New Nation about the transatlantic slave trade and its legacy

The transatlantic slave trade stands as one of the most inhuman enterprises in history. At a time when the capitals of Europe and America championed the Enlightenment of man, their merchants were enslaving a continent. Racism, not the rights of man, drove the horrors of the triangular trade. Some 12 million were transported. Some three million died.

Slavery's impact upon Africa, the Caribbean, the Americas and Europe was profound. Thankfully, Britain was the first country to abolish the trade. As we approach the commemoration for the 200th anniversary of that abolition, it is only right we also recognise the active role Britain played until then in the slave trade. British industry and ports were intimately intertwined in it. Britain's rise to global pre-eminence was partially dependent on a system of colonial slave labour and, as we recall its abolition, we should also recall our place in its practice.

It is hard to believe that what would now be a crime against humanity was legal at the time. Personally I believe the bicentenary offers us a chance not just to say how profoundly shameful the slave trade was - how we condemn its existence utterly and praise those who fought for its abolition, but also to express our deep sorrow that it ever happened, that it ever could have happened and to rejoice at the different and better times we live in today.

The people who fought against slavery came from all walks of life. They included slaves and former slaves like Olaudah Equiano, church leaders and statesmen like William Wilberforce and countless ordinary citizens who signed petitions, marched, lobbied and prayed for change. The bicentenary is an opportunity for us all to remember those who were bought and sold into slavery and those who struggled against its injustices.

Community, faith and cultural organisations, with the support in many cases of the Heritage Lottery Fund, are already planning events to mark the bicentenary. We in Government, with local authorities, will be playing our full part. And the UK is co-sponsoring a resolution in the UN General Assembly, put forward by Caribbean countries, which calls for special commemorative activities to be held by the United Nations to mark the



Tony Blair: 'We need to respond to the problems of Africa and the challenges facing the African and Caribbean diaspora today'

occasion.

We also need, while reflecting on the past, to acknowledge the unspeakable cruelty that persists in the form of modern day slavery. Today slavery comes in many guises around the world - such as bonded labour, forced recruitment of child soldiers and human trafficking - and at its root is poverty and social exclusion.

We also need to respond to the problems of Africa and the challenges facing the African and Caribbean diaspora today. Africa, of course, is a place of great beauty, fantastic diversity and a resilient and talented people with enormous potential. It is also the only continent getting poorer

and where, in many places, life expectancy is falling.

But the world is now focusing, not least because of the G8 summit and the Make Poverty History campaign, on how we can help Africa tackle its problems. Agreement was reached to double aid to Africa by 2010, to write off the debts of the poorest countries and massively to increase funding to tackle AIDS and improve healthcare and education.

Britain is playing its full part both through increasing bilateral aid and through international leadership. The International Finance Facility for Immunisation, which we have launched, should save five million children a year.

All this is making a difference. Debt relief is already beginning to flow. It has, for example, enabled Zambia to scrap charges for health care. This is taking place in partnership with African Governments and their people. But there is a great deal more to do.

At home, the bicentenary is also an opportunity for us to pause and consider the enormous contribution today of Black African and Caribbean

communities to our nation. Britain is richer in every way - for example, in business, politics, sport, the arts and science - because of the part played by these communities in every aspect of our national life. But even 30 years after Labour introduced the groundbreaking Race Relations Act and set up the Commission for Racial Equality, there are still barriers to overcome before everyone can make the most of their talents and potential.

Across government, we are investing in tackling inequality in education, health, employment, housing and the criminal justice system. I want to see a future in which everyone can achieve their full potential. Earlier this week, a group

of young people from Bristol, Hull and Liverpool visited the capital at the invitation of the Deputy Prime Minister and I know that our schools and colleges will play a big role in next year's commemorations and legacy events.

This bicentenary must also be a spur for us to redouble our efforts to stop human trafficking and all forms of modern slavery. But, above all, this 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade is a chance for all of us to increase our understanding of the heritage we share, celebrate the richness of our diversity and increase our determination to shape the world with the values we share.

'It is only right we recognise the active role Britain played in the slave trade'

'It is hard to believe that what would now be a crime against humanity was legal at the time'