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THE
SPEECH

OF THE

RT. HON. CHAS. JAMES FOX,

IN THE

HOUSE OF COMMONS,

June 10th, 1806.

ON A MOTION PREPARATORY TO THE INTRODUCTION

OF A BILL FOR THE

Abolition of the Slave Trade.



NEWCASTLE:

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1824.

ABOLITION OF THE SLAVE TRADE.

JUNE 10th, 1806.

IN pursuance of the notice he had given.

MR. SECRETARY FOX, rose and spoke as follows ;

BEFORE, Sir, I proceed to state the grounds on which I look with confidence for the almost unanimous countenance of the House in this measure, I feel myself called upon to say a few words by way of apology, for being the person to come forward upon the present occasion. For the last sixteen or seventeen years of my life, I have been in the habit of uniformly and strenuously supporting the several motions made by an honourable gentleman, (MR. WILBERFORCE,) who has so often, by his meritorious exertions on this subject, attracted the applause of this House, and obtained the admiration of the Public. During the long period that I found it in such excellent hands, it was impossible for me to feel the slightest disposition to take it out of them. I am still of the same opinion ; and cannot but think it would have been much better, if the same Honourable Member and his friends had retained it in their own hands, and they might certainly have depended upon me, and those with whom I have the honour to act, for the same ardent support which we have uniformly given them. But, Sir, the Honourable Member and many of his friends, seemed so strongly to entertain different sentiments in that respect, from me, that I submitted my own opinion to theirs, and now assume the task, reluctantly, on that account, but on every other, most gladly. So fully am I impressed with the vast importance and necessity of attaining what will be the object of my motion this night, that *if, during the almost forty years that I have had the honour of a seat in Parliament I had been so fortunate as to accomplish that, and that only, I should think I had done enough ; and could retire from public life with comfort, and the conscious satisfaction, that I had done my duty.*

Having made these preliminary observations, I now come to the main question, but do not think it necessary to stop at present, for the sake of referring in detail to all the entries on your journals, made at different periods since the year 1792, the different motions made by the Honourable Gentleman, the resolutions of the House, and the bills brought in to abolish the trade; particularly that which received the sanction of this House, though it was unfortunately negatived in another place. I have not lately had time, from other occupations, to prepare myself by referring minutely to dates and details; and must, therefore, content myself with a general reference, in which, should I fall into any mistake, I am sure there are gentlemen who will be certain to set me right. In the execution of this duty, I am happy to reflect, that whatever difference of opinion might have prevailed upon some points of this subject, between a few members; and, at one time, unhappily so as to defeat the measure, the opinion of this House upon the subject was, I will not say unanimous, for in that I may be contradicted but as nearly unanimous, as any thing of the kind could be, "that the Slave Trade is contrary to the principles of Justice, humanity, and sound policy." These, I believe, were the words of the resolution, adopted after a long and serious deliberation; and they are those which I mean to introduce into the resolution which I shall propose this night. Surely, Sir, it does not remain yet to be argued, that to carry men by violence away to slavery, in distant countries, to use the expression of an illustrious man, now no more, (MR. BURKE,) a man distinguished in every way, and in nothing more than for his great humanity, "is not a traffic in the labour of man, but in the man himself." I will not now enter, for it would be unnecessary, into that exploded argument, that we did not make the Negroes Slaves, but found them already in that state, and condemned to it for crimes. The nature of the crimes themselves (witchcraft in general) is a manifest pretext, and a mockery of all human reason. But, supposing them even to be real crimes, and such as men should be condemned for, can there be any thing more degrading to sense, or disgusting to humanity, than to think it honourable or justifiable in Great Britain, annually to send out ships in order to assist in the purposes of African police? It has, I am told, been asserted by an authority in the other House of Parliament, that the trade is in itself so good a one, that if it was not found already subsisting, it would be right to create it. I certainly will not compare the authority just alluded to with that of my honourable friend, (MR. WILBERFORCE,) who, in the efforts he has made in order to abolish this dishonourable traffic, has done himself so much honour. I will not compare that authority with the authority of a Right Honourable gentleman

now no more, (MR. PITT,) whose talents have always so justly been entitled to admiration, and whose eloquence was never more powerfully displayed on any occasion than in opposition to this scandalous traffic. I will not compare it with that of a Noble Viscount, (Sidmouth,) one of your predecessors, but not your immediate one, in that chair, than whom, though he opposed the manner in which we wished to obtain an abolition, yet as to the principle, no man ever enforced more strongly, or with more feeling, his utter detestation of it.

Another Noble Lord also, (LORD MELVILLE,) who took a lead in constantly opposing our attempts at a total and immediate abolition, yet, in regard to the principle, when he prevailed in his measure of gradual abolition, recorded his opinion on the journals, by moving, that the House considered the Slave Trade to be adverse to policy, humanity, and justice.

I do not, therefore, suppose, that there can be above one, or perhaps two Members in this House, who can object to a condemnation of the nature of the trade, and shall now proceed to recall the attention of the House to what has been its uniform, consistent, and unchangeable opinion for the last eighteen years, during which we should blush to have it stated, that not one step has yet been taken towards the abolition of the trade. If, then, we have never ceased to express our reprobation, surely the House must think itself bound by its character, and the consistency of its proceedings, to condemn it now.

The first time this measure was proposed on the motion of my honourable friend, which was in the year 1791, it was, after a long and warm discussion, rejected. In the following year, 1792, after the question had been, during the interval, better considered, there appeared to be a very strong disposition, generally, to adopt it to the full; but in the Committee, the question for a gradual abolition was carried. On that occasion, when the most strenuous efforts were made to specify the time when the total abolition should take place, there were several divisions in the House, about the number of years, and LORD MELVILLE, who was the leader and proposer of the gradual abolition, could not venture to push the period longer than eight years, or the year 1800, when it was to be totally abolished. Yet we are now in the year 1806, and while surrounding nations are reproaching us with neglect, not a single step has been taken towards this just, humane, and politic measure!

When the question for a gradual abolition was carried, there was no one could suppose that the trade would last so long: and in the mean time we have suffered other nations to take the lead of us. Denmark, much to its honour, has abolished the trade; or, if it could not abolish it altogether, has at least done all it could, for it has prohibited its being carried on in Danish ships,

or by Danish sailors. I own, that when I began to consider the subject, early in the present session, my opinion was, that the total abolition might be carried this year; but subsequent business intervened, occasioned by the discussions of the military plan; besides which, there was an abolition going forward in the foreign trade, from our colonies, and it was thought right to carry that measure through, before we proceeded to the other.

That bill has passed into a law, and so far we have already succeeded; but it is too late to carry the measure of abolition through the other House.

In this House, from a regard to the consistency of its own proceedings, we can indeed expect no great resistance; but the impediments that may be opposed to it in another, would not leave sufficient time to accomplish it. No alternative is therefore now left, but to let it pass over for the present session; and it is to afford no ground for a suspicion that we have abandoned it altogether, that we have recourse to the measure that I am now about to propose.

The motion will not mention any limitation, either as to the time or manner of abolishing the trade. There have been some hints indeed thrown out in some quarters, that it would be a better measure to adopt something that must inevitably lead to an abolition; but after eighteen years of close attention which I have paid to the subject, I cannot think any thing so effectual as a direct law for that purpose.

The next point is, as to the time when the abolition shall take place; for the same reasons or objections which led to the gradual measure of 1792, may here occur again. That also I leave open, but I have no hesitation to state, that with respect to that, my opinion is the same as it is with regard to the manner, and that I think it ought to be abolished immediately. As the motion, therefore, which I have to make, will leave to the House the time and manner of abolition, I cannot but confidently express my hope and confident expectation, that it will be unanimously carried; and I implore gentlemen not to listen to that sort of flattery which they have sometimes heard—and particularly from one of the members for Liverpool—that they have abolished it already.

When the regulations were adopted, touching the space to be allowed for each negro in a slave ship, the same gentleman opposed it as being destructive, and exclaimed, "Oh! if you do that, you may as well abolish it at once, for it cannot be done." Yet, when we propose an abolition altogether, they use, as arguments against us, the great good already done, by regulating the slave ships, and bettering the condition of negroes in the colonies.

In the same way, when we first proposed the abolition of the

foreign trade, they told us it would have the effect of a general and total abolition; and I beg of them not to forget that declaration now; and having made it once, I must use to them a phrase in common life, "Sir, if that be the case, I must pray you to put your hand to it." As to the stale argument the ruin the measure would bring upon the West India Islands, I would refer gentlemen to perhaps the most brilliant and convincing speech that ever was, I believe, delivered in this or any other place, by a consummate master of eloquence; (Mr Burke,) and which, I believe, there remains in some publications a report that will convey an inadequate idea of the substance, though it would be impossible to represent the manner; the voice, the gesture, the manner, were not to be described.—"*O! si illum vidisse, si illum audivisse!*" If all the members of this House could but have seen and heard the great orator in the delivery of that speech, on that day, there would not now be one who could for a moment longer suppose that the abolition of the Slave Trade could injuriously affect the interests of the West India Colonies. I am aware that a calculation was once made, and pretty generally circulated, by which it would appear, that were the importation of negroes into the islands put an end to, the stock of slaves could not be kept up; and, if I recollect right, the calculation was made with reference to the island of Jamaica. Fortunately, however, for our argument, the experiment has been already tried in North America, where the trade has been abolished; and the effect of it shews, that the population of the Negroes is nearly equal to that of the whites. As that is the part of the world where population proceeds more rapidly than in any other, and as we know that within the last twenty years, the population of whites has doubled, and that of negroes very nearly so, without importation, it affords, I will not say a damning, but a blessed proof, that the adoption of a similar course would ultimately produce gradual emancipation and an increasing population, and that it would enable the negroes to acquire property as the reward of long servitude; and that thereby these islands would be placed in a state of safety beyond any thing that could be effected by fleets or armies.

Nothing now remains for me, Sir, but to address a few words to those members opposite me, who are so fond of quoting the opinions of a Right Honourable gentleman deceased, (Mr. Pitt,) and who profess to entertain so profound a respect for his memory. They all know that there was no subject on which that Right Honourable gentleman displayed his extraordinary eloquence with more ardour than in support of the abolition of the slave trade. His speeches on that subject will not easily be forgotten; and, therefore, in supporting the present motion, they will not only have an opportunity of manifesting their pri-

rate friendship for him, their admiration of his splendid talents, and the sincerity of their zeal and respect for his character and memory; but also the opportunity of quoting him with great advantage: added to which, they may now display all this for the public good, and on a subject upon which they cannot be suspected of making that respect and admiration only a vehicle for party purposes

Mr. Fox then moved the following resolution: "That this House, conceiving the African Slave Trade to be contrary to the principles of justice, humanity, and sound policy, will, with all practicable expedition, proceed to take effectual measures for abolishing the said trade, in such manner, and at such period, as may be deemed advisable."

The motion was opposed by General Tarleton, Mr. Gascoyne, Lord Castlereagh, Sir William Young, Mr. Rose, and Mr. Manning; and supported by Sir Ralph Milbanke, Mr. Francis, Sir Samuel Romily, the Solicitor General, Mr. Wilberforce, Lord Henry Petty, Mr. Barham, Sir John Newport, Mr. Canning, Mr. William Smith, and Mr. Windham.

The House divided on Mr. Fox's motion:—

TELLERS.		TELLERS.	
Yeas.	{ Sir S. Romily, } { Mr. W. Smith, }	114.—Noes.	{ Sir W. Young, } { Gen. Tarleton, }
			15.