



By: *Harvey Morris*

# King Charles treads narrow line on atoning for slave-era crimes



One year into his reign, Britain's King Charles is facing pressure from former colonies in the Caribbean for an apology and compensation for his ancestors historic role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

The head of the Grenada government's reparations commission has said the monarch could expect a formal letter from the 15 members of the Caricom community of Caribbean states by the end of the year.

Given his past reflections on the iniquities of slavery, Charles might be well-disposed to such an approach. But that would put him at odds with the main political parties that have rejected appeals for reparations.

Months before his mother's death, the then Prince Charles told Commonwealth heads of state gathered in Rwanda: "I cannot describe the depths of my personal sorrow at the suffering of so many, as I continue to deepen my own understanding of slavery's enduring impact".

He apparently ignored the advice of Boris Johnson, the prime minister of the day, that mentioning slavery at the Rwanda gathering would open the royal family up to reparations claims, according to a former Johnson aide.

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During more than half a century as heir to the throne, Charles earned a reputation for controversial views on a range of issues from the environment to the evils of modern architecture.

This contrasted with his mother, who had a remarkable talent for not publicly expressing any contentious view or preference outside the racecourse.

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opinions on issues that stray into the preserve of politics.

The prospect that he might bow to Caricom demands has already inflamed sections of the conservative commentariat.

Columnist Petronella Wyatt, who claims a friendship with the Queen Consort Camilla, tweeted: "If Charles pays "reparations" while people in this country are struggling with the basic cost of living then I shall become a republican".

Since his accession, Buckingham Palace palace has said the new king actively supports research into links between the British monarchy and the transatlantic slave trade in which European colonisers shipped millions of enslaved Africans across the ocean.

This contrasts with the position expressed by the current prime minister, Rishi Sunak, who told parliament earlier this year: "Trying to unpick our history is not the right way forward, and it's not something that we will focus our energies on".

The opposition Labour Party meanwhile insists that payment of reparations is not party policy, despite some of its backbenchers arguing that the country has a duty to help mitigate the continuing impact of slavery.

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The reticence of politicians in the UK and elsewhere is perhaps understandable in the light of a report by a leading international consultancy that put Britain's share of the slavery reparations bill at a budget-shattering £16 trillion.

Caricom has already prepared a 10-point plan for the UK and the other former Caribbean slave-owning states - France, Spain and

Denmark - that would begin with their formal apology for the crimes of slavery.

They would also be asked for a commitment to help Caribbean countries, including through debt cancellation, to overcome the health, educational and technological deficits they regard as its continuing legacy.

Charles may see himself in a unique position to help right a wrong that has festered in both Africa and the Caribbean in the two centuries since transatlantic slavery was abolished.

As the head of a rich and influential monarchy, he is sovereign not only of Britain but also of an admittedly dwindling number of independent Caribbean states that have yet to opt to become republics.

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At the time of Queen Elizabeth's death, the chair of the Bahamas reparations committee, Niambi Hall-Campbell, said: "As the role of the monarchy changes, we expect this can be an opportunity to advance discussions of reparations for our region".

The King will nevertheless be wary of embracing a cause that does not resound widely among politicians or the public. He might ponder whether his legacy would be better preserved by ensuring the continuation of constitutional monarchy rather than promoting his own agenda.

Any resolution of the reparations issue raises the knotty question of who would provide the resources - individuals, institutions or states - and who would benefit - again, individuals, institutions or states.

The King cannot tell the UK government how to spend taxpayers money. But he could use his moral example to encourage others to become engaged in the reparations issue and perhaps, in turn, to press their MPs to act.

In the face of the reluctance of governments such as Sunak's to "unpick our history", some individuals and institutions have already taken matters into their own hands.

The Church of England announced in January that it would pledge £100 million to address the past wrongs of its historic links with the trade. Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, that it was "time to take action to address our shameful past".

The following month, the family of former BBC correspondent Laura Trevelyan announced they would pay £100,000 in reparations for their ancestors ownership enslaved Africans on the colony of Grenada. Other descendants of slave-owning families have followed suit.

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These developments have been driven by a new awareness of the experience and consequences of slavery revealed by a new generation of historians on both sides of the Atlantic.

The Black Lives Matter movement and the assaults on the statues of one-time slave owners in Britain have also brought the issue to the fore.

King Charles can only risk rising to the Caricom challenge if the reparations debate is couched in moral rather than political terms to avoid alienating government or public.

He might consider as a starting point to promote or even fund educational and exchange programmes to enhance the prospects of young people in the Caribbean and Africa and indeed in Britain.

That would be a positive compromise that might incidentally advance the reparations cause without undermining the public's

already fickle attitude to the monarchy.