



By: TA | AP Insight

Will Burnham's apology for Britain's role in the slave trade be sufficient?



U.K. Prime Minister Andy Burnham says his government will consider apologizing for the first time for its role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, but has rejected calls for the country to pay reparations.

Writing in the Guardian on Saturday, **Burnham said** Britain needed to acknowledge its “complicated history” in order to protect the Commonwealth, an association of 56 independent nations that grew out of the British Empire.

Burnham travels to Antigua and Barbuda in the Caribbean next week for a meeting of Commonwealth leaders, which he hopes will bolster the U.K.'s relations with nations in Africa and the Caribbean, many of which were **former colonies**.

“For years, those members of the Commonwealth affected by the slave trade have asked for an honest conversation about the legacies of slavery,” Burnham said. “By sticking our heads in the sand, we have damaged the ability of the Commonwealth to function.”

Burnham said his government is offering to begin a “structured dialogue” with those affected by slavery and will listen to calls for a formal apology by the British state, which benefited hugely from the slave trade before it was outlawed in 1833 — the British Empire was arguably founded on it.

“I do not think that British people today can be held liable for historical wrongs, however heinous, that happened in a different age under different laws and in which they played no personal part,” Burnham said.

Burnham gets former prime minister Brown on board to focus on debt

Instead, the prime minister said, he wants to address the issues that face the Commonwealth and other nations today, including high levels of debt faced by many

developing countries.

Gordon Brown, a champion of debt relief for developing nations, will attend the Commonwealth meeting

Burnham said he would work with other wealthy nations and investors to help vulnerable countries pay off their debts over a longer period and at lower interest rates.

To help move this initiative forward, former Prime Minister **Gordon Brown**, a champion of debt relief for developing nations, will attend the Commonwealth meeting, he said.

The king has been in a bind as to what he can say

King Charles III faced calls for Britain to apologize and pay reparations during the first phase of a nine-day trip to the Caribbean that will end with the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting Sunday through Wednesday in St. John's, the capital of Antigua and Barbuda.

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The king, whose forebears directly benefited from the slave trade, has been prevented from going further because it was government policy not to apologize for the country's role in the slave trade and Britain's constitutional monarch speaks on behalf of the elected government.

Britain seeks to shore up relations with former colonies

Burnham's comments come as Britain seeks to shore up relations with its traditional allies in the Commonwealth in the face of economic, environmental and military challenges around the world.

A change in the government's position could also respond to younger, more liberal voters at home, where activists have called for Britain to reexamine the legacy of its colonial history.

It involved the transfer of several million people from Africa to work, often in the most arduous conditions, on plantations in the Caribbean, North America and elsewhere.

In 2020, anti-racism protesters in Bristol tore down the statue of Edward Colston, an English merchant and politician, saying the city should no longer glorify the life of a slave trader.

Colston was a deputy governor of the Royal African Company, which shipped thousands of enslaved people to English colonies in the Americas.

The descendants of some British people who profited from the slave trade have already apologized and offered compensation.

They include the owner of the Guardian, a liberal newspaper where leaders of Burnham's Labour Party often lay out policy initiatives.



Differences over financial compensation should be addressed through dialogue - Gaston Browne

U.K. politicians have traditionally focused on the country's role in banning the slave trade in 1807 and outlawing slavery throughout the British Empire in 1833.

But Burnham said it is now time for the country to acknowledge the other side of the story as well.

"We are a country where brave people led the way in abolishing slavery, but we are also a country that participated in the trade in human lives," he said.

"The trans-Atlantic slave trade was a brutal and barbaric violation of those people," Burnham said. "I want to express my sorrow and regret for the pain and suffering of so many millions of people, and to recognize the way it still shapes our world today."

Barbados' prime minister, Mia Mottley, welcomed Burnham's acknowledgment of the "brutality of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, his openness to a formal apology and his offer of structured dialogue" but said there were differences on the issue of reparations.

"Those differences should not prevent progress on health, education, tackling poverty and inequality, and fairer debt terms for vulnerable states," she said on X.

Gaston Browne, Prime Minister of nearby Antigua and Barbuda, echoed Mottley's response, calling Burnham's comments a "significant and welcome development."

"The Caribbean's longstanding position on reparatory justice remains unchanged," he wrote on Facebook. "Differences over financial compensation should be addressed through dialogue, but they need not prevent progress in areas where agreement is possible."