

Lord William Wyndham Grenville

Slave Trade Abolition Bill  
(1807)

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## **SLAVE TRADE ABOLITION BILL.**

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The order of the day being read for the second reading of the Slave Trade Abolition bill,

Lord Grenville rose and spoke as follows:

In stating to your lordships, in detail, some of the arguments on which this important measure rests, I hope I shall be excused by your lordships if I should feel myself obliged, in some instances, to tread over the same ground which has become so familiar to you in the course of a discussion which has lasted for 20 years. After the investigation this subject has already undergone, it is scarcely possible to avoid repeating, in some instances, the same arguments to which we have so long been accustomed. I will, however, my lords, proceed to the discussion without further introduction, and, in the first place, to state that argument which is the principal foundation of this measure, namely, justice. This measure rests upon justice, and calls imperatively upon your lordships for your approbation and support. Had it been, my lords, merely a question of humanity, I am ready to admit that it might then have become a consideration with your lordships as to how far you would extend or circumscribe that humanity. Had it been simply a question involving the interests or welfare of the British empire in the West Indies, it would then certainly have been a question with your lordships how far and in what respect you should legislate. But in this instance I contend, that justice imperiously calls upon your lordships to abolish the Slave Trade. I have heard some opinions urged to the effect as if justice could contain opposite and contradictory tenets. Justice, my lords, is one, uniform and immutable. Is it to be endured that the profits obtained by robbery are to be urged as an argument for the continuance of robbery? Justice is still the same, and you are called upon by this measure not only to do justice to the oppressed and injured natives of Africa, but also to your own planters; to interpose between the planters of your own islands and their otherwise certain ruin and destruction. You are called upon to do justice to your own planters in spite of their prejudices and their fears, and to prevent them by this measure from meeting that destruction which is otherwise certain and inevitable.—Was it, therefore, a trade which was in itself lovely and amiable, [658] instead of being, as it is, wicked, criminal, and detestable, that you were now called upon to abolish, this would be

an unanswerable argument for its abolition, that its continuance must produce the ruin of our planters. But, my lords, when it is considered that this trade is the most criminal that any country can be engaged in; when it is considered how much guilt has been incurred in carrying it on, in tearing the unhappy Africans by thousands and tens of thousands, from their families, their friends, their connections, and their social ties, and dooming them to a life of slavery and misery, and after incurring all this guilt, that the continuance of the criminal traffic must end in the ruin of the planters in your islands, who vainly expect profit from it, surely there can be no doubt that this detestable trade ought at once to be abolished. We have heard, however, statements adduced for the purpose of attempting to prove that the present state of the population of the islands cannot be kept up without fresh importations. We are then to be told that that law of nature, which has hitherto been considered as universal, meets with an exception in the West Indies, and that there alone the increase and multiplication of the human species does not take place. Let us therefore examine how far this statement agrees with facts. Some years since I was engaged in calculations respecting the population of the West-India islands, along with a person who to many great and brilliant qualifications, added a complete knowledge of political arithmetic: I mean the late Mr. Pitt. The result of those calculations was, with respect to the island of Jamaica, that from the year 1698 to 1730, the excess of deaths above the births amounted to  $3\frac{1}{2}$  per cent.; from 1730 to 1755, to  $2\frac{1}{2}$  per cent.; from 1755 to 1769, to  $1\frac{3}{4}$ ; per cent.; from 1769 to 1780, to 3–5ths per cent.; and the average of three years ending, in 1798 or 1800, it is not material which, gives an excess of deaths of only 1–24th per cent. In this calculation is included the whole population of the island, and of course the fresh importations; and it is well known, that with respect to the latter, the negroes newly imported die in the harbours before they are landed to the amount of 5 per cent., and that many more die soon after they are set to work. It is therefore clear that the population of the island is perfectly competent to support itself. It is remarkable also that in Dominica, although [659] a newer island, and although fresh lands are known to be inimical to the increase of population, there is an excess of births above the deaths. The argument, therefore, that fresh importations are necessary to keep up the present population of the islands, completely fails. But then we are told that fresh importations are necessary in order to cultivate new lands. My lords, to encourage the continuance of the trade for this purpose is to ruin the planters of your islands: are they not now distressed by the

accumulation of produce on their hands, for which they cannot find a market; and will it not therefore be adding to their distress, and leading the planters on to their ruin, if you suffer the continuance of fresh importations? Even, however, on the supposition that the cultivation of the waste lands in Jamaica, or nearly the whole extent of the island of Trinidad, could produce profit to the planters, is it to be endured that this detestable traffic is to be continued, and such a mass of human misery produced, not to prevent loss but to create gain? My lords, according to a very moderate calculation, to bring into cultivation the waste lands in the islands of Jamaica, the slave trade must be continued for two or three centuries longer, and, to cultivate nearly the whole island of Trinidad, a much longer period, whilst it would take a million of those unfortunate beings from Africa to cultivate each island; to cultivate Trinidad even a greater number. Were it possible, my lords, that these two millions of human beings could be collected together at the same time, and that they could be contemplated with the reflection that they were to be torn from their families and their friends, that every social tie was to be broke asunder, that they were to be delivered over to barbarity and oppression, and were to endure the greatest misery that it is possible for human beings to suffer; would it be endured by any one of your lordships, that a traffic productive of so much misery should be continued for an instant? would it not soften the obdurate heart of the greatest barbarian that ever tyrannized in a slave ship? We were told, however, yesterday, by the learned counsel at the bar, that fresh importations were necessary, in order that the slaves might be more easily governed; we were told of the favourite maxim of divide et impera, and that by fresh importations the slaves were more readily divided into classes, and more easily kept [660] in order than one body of natives. My opinion is directly the contrary. Fresh importations are surely more likely to put those negroes already on the island in mind of the injustice they had previously suffered, and there is little difficulty in communicating a sense of injustice and oppression from man to man. Prohibit fresh importations, and let the negroes already on the islands be well treated and properly protected, and they will become sensible of the protection and kindness extended to them, and gradually lose their feelings of the original injustice practised upon them. The horrors of St. Domingo have been, however, presented to our view; but to what are they to be attributed? to the violation of solemn promises, to the breach of faith towards the negroes, and the gross injustice practised towards them. My lords, so far from the abolition of the slave trade having a tendency to

produce those horrors in our islands, I contend that it is the only measure that can prevent them. I have endeavoured to prove, my lords, that the continuance of this trade is unnecessary, with a view to the present state of the population of the islands, as that can support itself; that to suffer it to continue for the purpose of cultivating new lands, will be certain ruin to the planters, and that the abolition of the trade is the only way of avoiding, in your own islands, the horrors which have afflicted St. Domingo. Some years since, it was thought that a gradual abolition was the best mode of destroying this trade; the advocates at that period, of gradual abolition, must now be adopted for a total abolition, for the period has arrived to which they looked forward, namely, when the population of the islands would be able to support itself. Nothing but a total abolition will now satisfy justice. Let us not think that any regulations in the islands can be carried into effect with a view to abolition: on the contrary, abolition must take place with a view to regulations. In the year 1792, when the proposed abolition of the slave trade was negatived, it was agreed to address his majesty, praying him to send instructions to the governors of the colonies to procure the adoption of measures for the better protection, and the better treatment of the negroes. What was the consequence? My lords, I wish not to inflame, and therefore I will simply refer your lordships to the correspondence upon the table relative to that subject, and [661] particularly to that of my lord Seaforth, the governor of Barbadoes; three most horrible and dreadful murders of slaves were committed in that island, attended with circumstances of barbarity, which I will not shock your lordships by detailing. Lord Seaforth of course instituted an enquiry, upon which it was found that the murder of a slave was only punishable by a fine of eleven pounds. That noble lord, in conformity to the instructions he had received, and with a proper regard for the British character, immediately proposed to the legislature of the island, to enact a law, which affixed the punishment of death to the murder of a slave. How was this proposition received? it was received, my lords, with insult, and the council and house of assembly returned answers in language fitting, as they conceived, to the insult which had been offered to them. What then is to be expected from regulations to be adopted by the colonial assemblies? It is but right, however, that I should state, that I have heard it reported that the legislature of Barbadoes has since adopted the course which justice pointed out, and have affixed the proper punishment to the murder of a slave. Still, however, if the evidence of a slave is not to be received against a white, is there not

given to the master an opportunity of tyrannizing over his slaves, and inflicting on them dreadful cruelties without the possibility of bringing him to justice? Let us, my lords, abolish this criminal traffic, and we may look forward to the period when the slaves, become in a great degree natives of the islands, will feel the benefits of the protection extended to them, and the good treatment they experience, and will evince a corresponding attachment to the country from which they receive those benefits. Throughout all history we find that the progress from slavery to liberty has been first by means of personal slaves becoming predial, or attached to the land, and from thence they have ascended to freedom. My lords, I look forward to the period when the negroes in the West-India islands, becoming labourers, rather than slaves, will feel an interest in the welfare and prosperity of the country to whom they are indebted for protection, and of the islands where they experience real comforts, and when they may be called upon to share largely in the defence of those islands with a sure confidence in their loyalty and attachment. My lords, the measure now proposed for [662] the abolition of the slave trade is one to which I cannot think that any one who dispassionately considers the subject, can give a negative. What right do we derive from any human institution, or any divine ordinance, to tear the natives of Africa, to deprive them by force of the means of labouring for their own advantage, and to compel them to labour for our profit? If then to do so is gross injustice and oppression, as I contend it evidently and undoubtedly is, can there be a question that the character of the country ought to be cleared from the stain impressed by the guilt of such a traffic, of a traffic by the effect of which we keep Africa in a state of barbarity and desolation? In support of the trade, it has been said, that if we did not take away the individuals who are the objects of it, they would be put to death either as prisoners taken in war, or for witchcraft, or other crimes; but is it not evident, from the testimony we have had upon this subject, that this is not the fact? On the contrary, we have not only every reason to believe that the men made prisoners in war would be, according to the custom of barbarous nations, made domestic slaves to their captors, but we have every reason to conclude, that it is the temptations held out to the chiefs on the coast of Africa, for the gratification of their passions, that induces them to enter into those frequent wars, and that produces those frequent accusations of crimes, by means of which negroes are procured for the purpose of selling them to our traders. Of the desolating influence of the slave trade, in Africa, and its effects in keeping the country in a state of barbarity, we have

sufficient evidence in the Travels of Mr. Parke on that continent, although the work was edited by a person known to be one of the most active opponents of the abolition of the slave trade. Yet we find in that work, that it is towards the interior of the country, that population and civilization increase, and that on the coast barbarity continues to prevail, which can only be attributed to the influence of the trade, which your lordships are now called upon to abolish. My lords, an argument was used against this measure last session, which I cannot conceive entitled to the least weight. It was said that we ought not to abolish this trade, unless other powers would agree likewise to abolish it; that is to say, that we should not do an act of justice, unless other powers would consent [663] or rather that we should continue to commit injustice, and persist in guilt, in criminality, because if we did not, other powers would. As well might it be said, that a man could be justified in robbing another, because if he did not, he knew there was a banditti ready to commit the robbery; or that an assassin would be justified in committing murder, because he knew that if he did not, others were ready to perpetrate it. This argument, however, bad as it is, fails in its own grounds. The united states of America, who had fixed the period of the abolition to take place in 1808, have anticipated that period (I wish we had had the glory of being the first in the race), and there is already, according to the last accounts, a bill in its unresisted progress through the legislature, for the immediate abolition of this trade, in which it is declared that death shall be the punishment of those who deal in the blood of their fellow creatures. With respect to the European powers, how are France and Spain to carry on the trade? Sweden never engaged in it. There remains only Portugal, and how is that power to carry on the trade? Is it to our own islands, where we prohibit it; is it to the French islands, which we block up; is it to the Spanish islands, where we prevent it; and where is Portugal to find capital to carry it on? Another objection advanced by a noble and learned lord (Eldon) is, that this measure does not come up to the resolution passed last session, and that instead of the abolition of the African slave trade, we are only abolishing the British traffic in that trade; but is it to be contended, my lords, that because we cannot embrace all the good that may be done, that therefore we are not to effect a partial good? If that were the case, we could never effect any good whatever. My lords, in calling your attention to this great measure, let me entreat you to consider that the whole country looks to the parliament to wipe away the stigma attached to its character in continuing this detestable traffic; that it looks not merely to parliament, but to your lordships'

house. Twice has this measure failed in this house, and if this iniquitous traffic is not now abolished, the guilt will rest with your lordships. We have to lament the loss, in the other house of parliament, of some of the ablest and most distinguished advocates for the abolition; we have also to lament in this house, the loss of some of its able and strenuous supporters. Still, however, if your lord- [664] ships should agree to the abolition of this inhuman trade in blood, as I trust you will feel it due to your own character and to the character of the country to do, it will meet in the other house of parliament with the strenuous support of a person to whom the country is deeply indebted for having originally proposed the measure, and for having followed up that proposition by every exertion from which a chance could be derived of success. I cannot conceive any consciousness more truly gratifying than must be enjoyed by that person, on finding a measure to which he has devoted the labour of his life, carried into effect—a measure so truly benevolent, so admirably conducive to the virtuous prosperity of his country, and the welfare of mankind—a measure which will diffuse happiness amongst millions, now in existence, and for which his memory will be blessed by millions yet unborn. My lords, I have to apologize for having troubled your lordships so long; but upon a measure of such importance—a measure, for the completion of which I have been labouring for the last 20 years—the ardent zeal which I felt for the attainment of such an object, will, I trust, plead my excuse. The noble lord concluded by moving that the bill be now read a second time.