

**JANUARY 2016**

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**REPARATIONS**

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**NADIA BUTT**



DEBATING MATTERS  
**TOPIC  
GUIDES**

**MOTION:**

**“BRITAIN SHOULD  
PAY REPARATIONS  
FOR ITS ROLE IN THE  
SLAVE TRADE”**

# ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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## KEY TERMS

[Reparations](#)

[Transatlantic Slave Trade](#)

# INTRODUCTION

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# NOTES

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Despite The Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 formally outlawing slavery throughout the British Empire nearly 200 years ago [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)], Prime Minister David Cameron’s first state visit to Jamaica last September was overshadowed by calls from high-profile politicians, including Jamaican leader Portia Simpson Miller, for Britain to pay reparations for its involvement in the slave trade [Ref: [RT](#)]. This is just one example of an increasing demand for reparations from Western nations to individuals and countries who were affected by the slave trade. According to some calculations, reparations for the transatlantic slave trade [Ref: [UNESCO](#)] could add up to \$14 trillion [Ref: [Newsweek](#)] and those calling for reparations argue that slavery facilitated the rise of Britain as a global player, and forced human exploitation was a “major source of wealth of the British Empire” [Ref: [Independent](#)]. The implication of this is that the impact of slavery has filtered down through generations and had a discernible material impact on the present: benefiting the descendants of those who owned and traded slaves, and holding back the societies of the descendants of slaves [Ref: [New Statesman](#)]. Critics of reparations are concerned about the idea of apologising and paying reparations for something no modern Briton was a part of, and question whether reparations are ever the way to resolve historical injustice. Though few would argue about the inhumanity that slavery embodied, the issue at hand is whether there is a moral and financial debt still to be paid by modern Western states, such as the UK. Would financial reparations absolve the UK once and for all from its debt to generations of peoples affected by the transatlantic slave trade? Or should we stop trying to find solutions to today’s problems by resolving history’s wrongs?



# THE REPARATIONS DEBATE IN CONTEXT

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## The Moral Case

In his Second Treatise on Government, philosopher John Locke observes that, “he who hath received any damage, has, besides the right of punishment common to him with other men, a particular right to seek reparation” [Ref: [The Atlantic](#)]. This right to seek redress in the face of injustice, lies at the heart of the moral case for reparations as a way of atoning for hundreds of years of unpaid labour, suffering and exploitation. For writer Kehinde Andrews, the moral case for reparations is obvious. He dismisses arguments by opponents that the Caribbean should move on from slavery, noting that such sentiments fail to “properly acknowledge Britain’s role in the kidnap, slaughter, rape and exploitation of millions of Africans”, and he goes on to conclude that as such, “it is clear as day that Britain owes a substantial debt to the descendants of those who were enslaved.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)] Advocates of reparations also point to the fact that more than two million Africans were trafficked to the Caribbean by the British during slavery, and reparations would go some way to attaining justice for those “genocidal actions” [Ref: [New York Times](#)]. However, others note that in terms of moral atonement, with great financial cost to itself, we must not forget that Britain played a significant role in the abolition of slavery globally [Ref: [Forbes](#)]. And some critics also view the moral opprobrium surrounding reparations as problematic, and question whether it is ethically right for modern citizens to apologise or pay reparations for actions carried out by ancestors, generations ago. For example, columnist Patrick West states that “you can’t apologise for something you didn’t do. It’s an effortless and insincere gesture” [Ref: [spiked](#)]. Do we as a modern society still have a moral duty to atone for

this historic act of inhumanity, or is it the case that “we cannot have collective responsibility for everything that anyone from our country has ever done in the history of the world” [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]?

## A lasting legacy?

Opponents of reparations are wary of attributing any modern social, economic or cultural problems to the institution of slavery, and reject the idea that the decedents of slaves are determined by the events of the past. To highlight this, one journalist claims that the talk of historical legacies results in black people being “treated as the pathetic, psychologically damaged goods of historical events...not as the authors of their own lives, but as hapless characters in a play written by someone or something else.” [Ref: [Spectator](#)] Moreover, for campaigner Josie Appleton: “There seems to be an idea that harm, and responsibility for harm, is transmitted pathologically from generation to generation” which falsely assumes that descendants of slaves are unable to break free “under the weight of their psychological chains” [Ref: [spiked](#)]. Others are also reluctant to accept that the whole Caribbean is in abject poverty as a result of the legacy of slavery. According to recent figures, “Most slave colonies in the Caribbean are now fairly successful middle income countries, or better...the Bahamas has a GDP per head close to that of Italy or Spain. Barbados scores higher on the UN Development Programme’s human development index than any of its much larger South American neighbours” [Ref: [Economist](#)]. However, advocates dismiss these suggestions, and say that we can clearly see the modern legacy of slavery in the UK and the Caribbean. They argue that whilst the West has thrived on the “ports, docks



## THE REPARATIONS DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED

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and roads being constructed with money made from the slave trade”, the legacy for the Caribbean has been characterised by “high levels of depravation... crumbling infrastructure and 20 per cent of its population in poverty” [Ref: [The Student](#)]. Similarly, Priyamvada Gopal contends that: “The Industrial Revolution would have been impossible without the wealth generated by slave labour. Britain’s major ports, cities and canals were built on invested slave money. Several banks can trace their origins to the financing of the slave trade...The Bank of England also had close ties to the trade.” [Ref: [New Statesman](#)] The key point being that although slavery was abolished nearly 200 years ago: “The effects of this time are still felt around the world today”, and reparations would help address the “wrongs of slavery so that the countries and peoples that suffered throughout history, can begin economic and social development on equal terms with former colonisers” [Ref: [New York Times](#)].

### Reparations to whom?

In 1834, one year after the British abolition of slavery, the 46,000 British slave owners received compensation to the tune of between £16bn and £17bn from the British government for their ‘loss of property’, while the freed slaves received nothing [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. For supporters of reparations, this injustice is part of the reason why they are so important. In 2014 the Caribbean Community Secretariat (CARICOM) outlined a ten point plan for reparations [Ref: [Leighday](#)], and one of the suggestions was debt cancellation for Caribbean countries, as a way of lessening the financial burden that they argue is a direct legacy of slavery [Ref: [Leighday](#)]. In the same vein, others argue that the introduction of fair trading policies and sensible aid programmes

are the “best possible form of reparations for the wrongs of the past.” [Ref: [New York Times](#)] In the press and media, there have been intimations that the UK should pay Jamaica up to \$25bn in reparations [Ref: [Business Insider](#)], but for critics, the practicalities of who would be paid, and how, is a key area of weakness in the pro reparations argument. Julia Hartley-Brewer outlines the problem, when she notes that the majority of slaves were actually sold by fellow black Africans to Europeans – and so asks whether Caribbean countries should be asking African nations for reparations too [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. She goes on to argue that whilst the transatlantic slave trade was an abomination, it is unclear why its descendants are more deserving of reparations than those of Egyptian slaves for instance [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Others are also unsure whether reparations are the way to address historical legacies more broadly. MP Tristram Hunt for instance, argues that as an alternative we need to “boost cultural and educational links,” in addition to incorporating slavery and colonialism into the curriculum in the UK [Ref: [The Times](#)]. So with all things considered, are reparations a good idea to rectify a historical wrong? Or are they impractical, embodying a worrying trend of pathologising the past?



# ESSENTIAL READING

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## FOR

[Africa: What should reparations for slavery entail?](#)

Ama Biney *All Africa* 14 October 2015

[Jamaica is owed reparations for British imperialism](#)

Benedict Cottrell-Boyce *The Student* 6 October 2015

[It's Britain that needs to 'move on' over slavery – away from the myths](#)

Kehinde Andrews *Guardian* 1 October 2015

[Much of Britain's wealth is built on slavery. So why shouldn't it pay reparations?](#)

Priyamvada Gopal *New Statesman* 23 April 2014

## AGAINST

[The slave trade was not my fault](#)

Patrick West *spiked* 9 October 2015

[Reparations for Britain's Atlantic Slave Trade would be impractical](#)

John MacKenzie *New York Times* 8 October 2015

[No, Britain doesn't need to pay reparations for the slave trade](#)

Brendan O'Neill *Spectator* 30 September 2015

[Jamaican reparations: British taxpayers are not to blame for the horror of slavery](#)

Julia Hartley-Brewer *Telegraph* 29 September 2015

## IN DEPTH

[Britain's colonial shame: slave owners given huge payouts after abolition](#)

Sanchez Manning *Independent* 26 February 2015

[The case for reparations](#)

Ta-Nehisi Coates *Atlantic* June 2014



## BACKGROUNDEERS

[Justice requires former colonialists pay reparations](#)

Verene A. Shepherd *New York Times* 8 October 2015

[Big debate: Should Britain pay reparations for its role in the Atlantic slave trade?](#)

Iain Burns *Newham Recorder* 7 October 2015

[The absurdity of demanding reparations for slavery](#)

Daniel Hannan *Hannan.co.uk* 6 October 2015

[We shouldn't pay blood money for slavery](#)

Tristram Hunt *The Times* 3 October 2015

[Cameron, slavery, history and the enlightenment tradition](#)

Tanzil Chowdhury *Critical Legal Thinking* 1 October 2015

[The Guardian view on Britain's slavery inheritance: reflect and atone](#)

*Guardian* 30 September 2015

[Britain has a duty to clean up the monumental mess of Empire, Sir Hilary tell Cameron](#)

Sir Hilary Beckles *Jamaica Observer* 28 September 2015

[World Development Indicators: Size of the economy](#)

*World Bank* 18 September 2015

[The history of British slave ownership has been buried: now its scale can be revealed](#)

David Olusoga *Guardian* 12 July 2015

[Cutting through the nonsense](#)

*Economist* 27 May 2014

[The Caribbean people have a legitimate claim for slavery reparations](#)

Cecily Jones *Guardian* 16 March 2014

[Blood Money](#)

*Economist* 5 October 2013

[We British would be delighted to accept reparations for the Slave Trade and slavery](#)

Tim Worstall *Forbes* 26 July 2013

[Should we pay for the sins of our fathers?](#)

James Walvin *Times Higher Education* 7 October 2007

[Slavery reparation: why now?](#)

Josie Appleton *spiked* 5 September 2001

[Slavery Abolition Act 1833](#)

*Wikipedia*

## ORGANISATIONS

[Caribbean Community Secretariat](#)

[Colonialism Reparation](#)

[National Commission on Reparations](#)

[UNESCO](#)

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## IN THE NEWS

[‘Jamaica must move on from painful legacy of slavery’ – Cameron](#)

*Russia Today* 1 October 2015

[David Cameron’s Jamaica visit overshadowed by slave trade reparations call](#)

*Huffington Post* 30 September 2015

[David Cameron rules out slavery reparation during Jamaica visit](#)

*BBC News* 30 September 2015

[Jamaica wants UK to pay them \\$25 billion as financial reparation for involvement in slave trade](#)

*Business Insider* 30 September 2015

[Slavery reparations could cost up to \\$1 trillion according to new calculation](#)

*Newsweek* 19 August 2015

[Benedict Cumberbatch’s ancestors built their multimillion pound fortune on backs of ‘250 negroes’](#)

*Daily Mail* 29 January 2015

[CARICOM nations unanimously approve 10 point plan for slavery reparations](#)

*LeighDay.co.uk* 11 March 2014

[Caribbean nations agree to seek slavery reparations from Europe](#)

*Reuters* 11 March 2014

[Jamaica leads Caribbean calls for Britain to pay slavery reparations](#)

*Telegraph* 15 February 2014

[14 Caribbean nations sue European countries for slavery reparations](#)

*Huffington Post* 30 September 2013

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## AUDIO/VISUAL

[Should Britain pay Jamaica reparations for slavery?](#)

Phoebe Greenwood *Guardian* 30 September 2015

[Dr Shashi Tharoor MP – Britain does owe reparations](#)

*Oxford Union* 14 July 2015

[The morality of empire](#)

Moral Maze *BBC Radio 4* 18 July 2012





## ADVICE FOR DEBATING MATTERS



### FOR STUDENTS

#### READ EVERYTHING .....

In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

#### STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....

Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

#### BE BOLD

Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

#### DON'T BACK DOWN

Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

#### DON'T PANIC

Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

### FOR TEACHERS

Hoping to start a debating club? Looking for ways to give your debaters more experience? Debating Matters have a wide range of resources to help develop a culture of debate in your school and many more Topic Guides like this one to bring out the best in your students. For these and details of how to enter a team for the Debating Matters Competition visit our website, [www.debatingmatters.com](http://www.debatingmatters.com)

### FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether students have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far students have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent students have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of schools competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.



**“WORLD REQUIRES  
THE CAPACITY  
TO MARSHALL  
CHALLENGING IDEAS  
AND ARGUMENTS”**

**LORD BOATENG, FORMER BRITISH HIGH  
COMMISSIONER TO SOUTH AFRICA**