

Barbados declares a republic: British imperialism's legacy of slavery and colonialism

Jean Shaoul**13 December 2021**

Dame Sandra Mason, Barbados' governor-general since 2018, was sworn in as president of the Caribbean island of Barbados on November 30, replacing Britain's Queen Elizabeth as the head of state.

Her swearing-in ceremony marking the 55th anniversary of formal independence from Britain came 396 years after Barbados became a British colony and nearly 250 years after the American colonies threw off the yoke of King George III.

Barbados, which announced its plan to become a republic last year, is to remain within the Commonwealth, a loose association of 54 member states, almost all of which are former British colonies and current dependencies, aimed at preserving Britain's declining economic, political and military influence. Just 15 countries still have the queen as their head of state, including Australia, Canada, Jamaica, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea, puncturing Prime Minister Boris Johnson's vain boasting in the wake of Brexit that "global Britain" would reinvigorate its ties with Commonwealth countries.

Prince Charles, heir to the British throne, was the guest of honour at the event in the capital Bridgetown, along with singer Rihanna and cricketer Sir Garfield Sobers. Amid much pomp and ceremony, a final salute was made to the monarchy, the Royal Standard flag was lowered and replaced, and Charles was awarded the Order of Freedom of Barbados. Mason announced, unctuously, "Vessel Republic Barbados has set sail on her maiden voyage. May she weather all storms and land our country and citizens safely on the horizons and shores which are ahead of us."

Charles paid a fleeting reference to Britain's horrific role in Barbados' history, saying, "From the darkest days of our past, and the appalling atrocity of slavery, which forever stains our history, the people of this island forged their path with extraordinary fortitude."

But no matter how Charles might like to portray slavery and the colonization of Barbados as a "blot" on Britain's otherwise pristine record, the bloody crimes of British imperialism are legion, including those in Ireland, encompassing the Great Famine of 1845-6, the plundering and later brutal partition of India, the opium wars in China and the Mau Mau atrocities in Kenya to name but a few.

Barbados and slavery

Barbados was England's first truly profitable slave society that provided what Marx described as primitive capitalist accumulation. It became the launchpad for the colonization of America and its modus operandi was replicated across its colonial possessions in the Western Hemisphere.

Professor Hilary Beckles, a Barbadian historian and head of the

University of the West Indies, wrote, "Barbados was the birthplace of British slave society and the most ruthlessly colonised by Britain's ruling elites. They made their fortunes from sugar produced by an enslaved, 'disposable' workforce, and this great wealth secured Britain's place as an imperial superpower and caused untold suffering."

The first British settlers arrived in Barbados in 1625. It was largely uninhabited as a result of prior murderous encounters with Spanish explorers and disease. A coral island, it is generally flat and arable, unlike the mountainous volcanic islands in the region. While the British initially used indentured servants or prisoners to work on the plantations, slaves soon became the dominant workforce.

Captain John Powell brought the first slaves to the island from West Africa in 1627, as part of the Triangle Trade whereby ships from Western Europe sold guns and manufactured goods in exchange for slaves from what is now Nigeria and Ghana, who were transported to Barbados and other Caribbean islands—the infamous "Middle Passage." There, the slaves were sold, with the ships returning to England with Caribbean exports, protected against rival powers by the Royal Navy that grew as the direct result of the slave trade.

The conditions of the slaves' capture, the forced marches to the dungeons in West Africa and their detention while they awaited transport to the West Indies were horrific, with many dying in their cells. Between 10 and 30 percent died aboard the slave vessels, where men, women and children were chained together during the 100-day voyage amid their own vomit and excrement, with sick or dead slaves thrown overboard. When they arrived in the West Indies, they would be cleaned and fattened up like cattle for sale, and then auctioned, with those deemed unsaleable left to die. In 1636, British officials in Barbados passed legislation declaring all slaves, later extended to include their children, to be enslaved for life. These laws were later adopted by Britain's other slave-owning colonies.

Conditions were just as murderous on the plantations, with even more men, women and children dying as they laboured 18 hours a day in the fields, growing cotton, tobacco, ginger or indigo, under the whip of their overseers. One slave ship captain Thomas Phillips later wrote of the slaves who threw themselves into the sea to avoid transportation, "they have a more dreadful apprehension of Barbados than we have of hell."

In the 1640s, Dutch merchants introduced sugar to Barbados and with the knowledge and technology gained from Brazilian plantations showed the Barbadian planters how to grow and process sugarcane to make molasses and rum. When tobacco cultivation became unprofitable after the glut of Virginia-produced tobacco in the 1650s, the island was given over to sugar production. An industry unique in combining both a large labour force with industrial production in the form of the sugar mills, it entailed Barbados' almost complete deforestation. Requiring vast quantities of labourers, the industry provided 93 percent of its exports. By

the latter part of the 17th century, it had turned Britain into a major player in the slave trade.

By 1750, sugar became the most valuable commodity in European trade, making up one fifth of all European imports as production was extended throughout the Caribbean during the 18th and 19th centuries, of which around three quarters was shipped to London, with Barbados becoming the richest of all the European colonies in the region.

With few surviving more than nine years in Britain's "islands in the sun," the plantation owners required ever more shipments of slaves to renew the labour force. The conditions on the plantations in Barbados were so horrendous that rebellions and the fear of rebellions were a key feature of colonial life. There were three major slave rebellions in the 17th century, in 1649, 1675 and 1692, all suppressed with utmost brutality. In Jamaica, runaway slaves, known as the Maroons, held out for decades in the mountains against the British, farming where they could and raiding the plantations. There were frequent rebellions on the crossings and at the African slave ports as well as at the ports where they landed. These rebellions became widespread, destabilizing colonial society.

England's monarchs were involved in the slave trade from the start, renting out their ships and taking a share of the proceeds, about which the current heir to the throne maintained a discreet silence. This involvement grew in the 17th century when Royalist supporters sought refuge in Barbados after their defeat in the English Civil War. Later, parliament, with the backing of the restored monarch King Charles II and his brother, the Duke of York who later became James II, granted a new patent to the Company of Royal Adventurers, the Royal Gambia Society and later the Royal African Company (RAC)—companies in which the monarchy had major stakes. It gave them a monopoly over most of the West African trade, which included gold as well as slaves, from which the ports of London, Bristol and Liverpool prospered, and the monarchy profited directly. The gold these companies supplied to the Royal Mint was called the guinea, after the West African country from which the gold was taken.

In 1797, the poet and Reverend William Bagshaw Stevens was struck by the 1,200 ships at anchor while visiting Liverpool's massive docks. He wrote in his diary that "this large-built town, every Brick is cemented ... by the blood and sweat of Negroes"—a phrase later adopted by many opponents of slavery.

The intense rivalry between the European powers was to lead to a series of wars that ultimately enabled Britain to predominate at the expense of her Dutch, Portuguese, French and Danish rivals. Britain was responsible for the largest share of the 9-15 million slaves taken across the Atlantic by the European traders, dominating the trade by the mid-18th century to the extent that, in 1776, when Britain's 13 American colonies declared independence, it accounted for more than half of all the slaves transported across the Atlantic.

Some 18 percent of the total went to the Caribbean islands, nearly double the number that went to the North American colonies. Estimates of the number of slaves shipped to Barbados between 1627 and 1807, when Britain abolished the slave trade, range between 387,000 and 600,000. It is estimated that Britain's slave merchants made profits of about £12 million on the purchase and sale of African people between 1630 and 1807, perhaps £16 billion in today's money.

To put it another way, Britain's Caribbean islands had about one million slaves working 3,000 hours a year, without a penny in wages, producing, sugar, coffee and cotton, at a time when England's own population was just five million.

The highly profitable sugar trade soon made Barbados Britain's most populated colony and possibly one of the most densely populated places on earth. It became the launch pad for the colonisation of the Americas, particularly in relation to Jamaica and the Carolinas in North America, transplanting their West Indian model of plantations and slavery to the new colonies, and the flow of settlers to other parts of the New World. It

became a powerful political force as the British merchants and West Indian plantation owners joined forces to form the West India Interest in the 1740s to lobby Parliament on behalf of the Caribbean sugar trade. Plantation owners or their representatives were able to purchase rotten boroughs, nominally a town or borough but with only two or three electors, giving them 40 to 50 seats in Parliament.

The plantation owners became the nexus of the most reactionary politics, the "old corruption," with the British West Indies, including Barbados, among the staunchest supporters of King George III in the American War of Independence, and later providing refuge for the defeated American Loyalists.

The slave trade played a crucial role in developing Britain's wider economy, providing its factories and workshops with access to raw materials. Financial, commercial, legal and insurance institutions emerged to support the trade, including Lloyds Insurance, Barclays Bank and Barings, with some merchants becoming bankers and the profits from slave-trading financing the development of new businesses and industries, enabling the vast expansion of manufactured goods that was to make Britain the "workshop of the world" in the 19th century.

The abolition of slavery

The ideas of the Enlightenment—freedom, equality and democratic rights—embodied in the American and French revolutions inspired widespread anti-slavery sentiment, both in the colonies and in Britain, where slavery had become a symbol of the Old Corruption. Abolition became a transatlantic movement. Economically, the American Revolution undermined the British mercantilist system, strengthening the rising industrial class even as its industry became increasingly intertwined with the American South's cotton-slave economy, growing apace after the invention of the cotton gin in 1793.

The French Revolution was to lead to the 1791 slave revolt led by Toussaint L'Overture, a former Haitian slave and military leader of an army of former slaves and deserters from the French and Spanish armies, who fought to end slavery and gain Haiti's independence from France and Spain, successfully ending slavery there in 1804.

In Britain, William Wilberforce set up the Abolition Committee and began a campaign in Parliament in 1787. Support for the abolitionists grew rapidly. Their emblem and motto, designed by Josiah Wedgwood in 1787, depicting an African man kneeling and asking, "Am I not a man and a brother?", became ubiquitous.

Petitions supporting abolition attracting thousands of signatures multiplied, becoming a political weapon for workers reflecting their increasing radicalisation, with Manchester, a city of some 75,000 people, providing 10,639 signatures in more than 100 petitions in 1788 and 20,000 in 519 petitions in 1792 in support of Wilberforce's anti-slavery bill.

With London home to around 20,000 people of African origin, including former slaves, Black activists like Robert Mandeville, Thomas Cooper, Jasper Goree, William Greene and Ottobah Cugoano played a crucial role in the anti-slavery movement. The most well-known is Olaudah Equiano, a journalist and former slave, whose autobiography exposing the sufferings of the Middle Passage journey—the first such book about slavery by a slave—sold 50,000 copies within two months of publication in 1788.

Equiano also publicized the infamous Zong massacre of November 1781, when the crew of the British slave ship threw more than 130 enslaved Africans overboard after running low on drinking water. The Zong's owners made a claim to their insurers for the loss of the slaves, resulting in a series of court cases, one of which upheld the legality of

murdering enslaved people in some circumstances and required the insurers to compensate the owners for those who had died. A subsequent court ruled against the owners because of evidence showing the captain and crew were at fault.

The Zong massacre became a symbol of the horrors of the Middle Passage and gave a powerful impetus to the abolitionist movement in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It led to legislation banning insurance companies from reimbursing ship owners when enslaved people were thrown overboard. It also inspired poets and artists, including J M W Turner, who painted *The Slave Ship* that was exhibited at the Royal academy in 1840, and William Blake, who illustrated *Narrative of a Five Year's Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam 1791*, John Stedman's account of the brutal suppression of a slave revolt in South America, depicting the terrible suffering of slaves tortured for rebelling.

Nevertheless, it was to take years of struggle before Wilberforce secured the end of the slave trade in 1807, initially disguised as a measure aimed at undermining the French economy. He expected this would improve conditions on the plantations and lead to the end of slavery. Further uprisings, including the three-day revolt led by Bussa of Bayley's plantation in Barbados in 1816 that saw the colonial militia kill more than 800 slaves in the fighting and at least another 100 executed, and the Demarara (now Guyana) revolt of 1823, made clear that slavery could only be maintained if Britain were to send in the troops, which Parliament was not prepared to do.

In 1824, Robert Wedderburn, a Jamaican Unitarian minister, who had come to Britain in 1778, published *The Horrors of Slavery*, whose revolutionary appeal reached the colonies. His impassioned and abiding motto to his fellow blacks was "It is degrading to human nature to petition your oppressors." The unrest continued, culminating in the Jamaica Revolt of Christmas 1831 that saw more than 400 slaves killed in its suppression and several British non-conformist ministers beaten, tarred and feathered for their involvement in the uprising.

These events further inflamed public opinion in Britain against the plantation owners amid the ongoing mass mobilization of the working class demanding electoral reforms and the alleviation of their own miserable living conditions, reigniting the demand for an end to slavery. The resurgence of the abolition movement was accompanied by an outpouring of anti-slavery literature and pamphlets and renewed petitioning. In 1814, there were 1.5 million signatures on more than 800 anti-slavery petitions in a single month. Between 1826 and 1832, the House of Lords received more than 3,500 petitions.

It was the reformed Parliament, established after the Great Reform Act of 1832, that, while not ushering in a democratic system or enfranchising the working class, did wound the old political order, bringing new political interests into Parliament. As one of its first acts, it passed legislation in 1833 abolishing slavery in all the territories under British rule.

The Abolition of Slavery Act, however, included measures designed to keep the slaves bound to the plantations, limiting their right to own land and in effect providing a form of indentured labour for a period of six years as a form of "apprenticeship." Furthermore, unlike the American Civil War that freed the slaves without a penny compensation to their former owners, the 1837 Slave Compensation Act, in response to pressure from the West India Interest lobby group, authorised the payment of about £20 million compensation (about £17 billion in today's money) to 40,000 slave owners, many of whom had never set foot in their Caribbean plantations. This was equal to around 40 percent of the Treasury's tax receipts at the time. Not a penny was provided to the former slaves in what was the largest bailout in British history until Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown's bailout of the banks in 2008-9.

The slave owners used the money to invest in the growing bond market, buy property in Britain and patronize the arts and architecture as way of

laundering their image and buying respectability back home.

The British ruling class, never one to miss an opportunity to score against its rivals, used the Abolition Act to pose as the anti-slavery watchdog, policing the West African coast, blockading its ports, seizing slaving ships and protecting Britain's commercial interests as a prelude to the later colonization of Africa.

The legacy of slavery and the impact of imperialist rule today

The end of slavery left the former slaves as indentured servants under 12-year labour contracts, the longest such period in the Caribbean, receiving in return some of the lowest wages in the region. Some worked 45-hour weeks without pay in order to retain their family accommodation in tiny huts, while others left the plantations, forcing the owners to search for labourers in Spain, Portugal, India and China. With inadequate rights to own land, few tilled their own fields. Taxes were high and many became unemployed as the plantation owners brought in mechanized equipment.

The abuse and deprivation continued, courtesy of the state on the plantation owners' behalf rather than directly by the former slave owners, enabling the plantation owners and merchants of British descent to continue their domination of the island's politics.

Staggeringly, the high-income qualification required for voting that excluded more than 70 percent of the population was not amended until 1942.

While the descendants of the emancipated slaves began a movement for political rights in the 1930s, this was dominated by the Barbados Progressive league, later to become the Barbados Labour Party, whose leader, Grantley Adams, was a staunch anti-communist and supporter of the British monarchy. He went on to become prime minister in 1953, a post he held until 1961, and was later knighted by Her Majesty for services rendered. His son later became Barbados' second premier since independence in 1966, between 1976 and 1985.

None of the island's governments have been able to redress British imperialism's legacy of underdevelopment, dependency and above all economic hardship and social inequality. Today, the economic and social conditions prevailing in this "paradise" island in the sun, reliant upon tourism (accounting for 17 percent of GDP in 2019), financial services for the world's corporations and kleptocrats that use Barbados as a tax haven, and remittances from migrants, are replicated across the Caribbean and all the imperialist powers' former colonial possessions.

A recent World Bank Report pointed to the impact of the 2008-9 global financial crisis, precipitated by the criminal practices of the world's major financial institutions, from which Barbados has never recovered. Government borrowings rose from 55 percent of GDP in 2008 to 158 percent in 2017, leading to a major recession, the suspension of its debt payments in 2018, and a restructuring plan aimed at reducing government spending and securing a loan from the International Monetary Fund. Even before this, the proportion of Barbadians living in poverty had risen from 15.1 percent in 2010 to 17.2 percent in 2016. Both the restructuring plan and more recently the pandemic have massively impacted workers' livelihoods, with the economy projected to have contracted by 17 percent in 2020. According to the World Bank, about one in five households reported losing their main source of income in the first quarter of 2020, with a massive 40 percent unable to meet their most basic needs.

The International Monetary Fund noted that the impact of the pandemic on economic and social conditions has been greater in Latin America and the Caribbean than in any other emerging or developed region. As a recent OECD report pointed out, the region entered the COVID-19 crisis with

most of these countries experiencing increasing social discontent, following five years of the weakest growth since the 1950s. In 2019, growth was virtually zero, with protests erupting throughout the region. The pandemic has touched every aspect of people's lives, widening inequalities. Despite the pandemic being in its most deadly phase since the beginning of 2020, the government, like its counterparts elsewhere, has implemented token restrictions in order to keep the profits flowing.

These terrible conditions provide the context for the Barbados government's decision to become a republic after 396 years of allegiance to the British Crown. It is nothing more than an attempt to shore up its vanishing credibility in the face of rising social discontent as it prepares to combat any movement against capitalism and unleash state repression to maintain the wealth and privileges of a tiny elite. It hopes to chloroform workers and their families with talk of a "new beginning", a cynical euphemism for yet more market-based reforms in the service of the international banks.

Barbados' history provides a powerful refutation of the central thesis of the *New York Times'* 1619 Project, which claims that the American Revolution, far from being an attempt to throw off the tyranny of King George III, was a counterrevolution waged to defend the institution of slavery against Britain's more enlightened rule.

This brief review shows that Britain was a major player in the slave trade and the system of slave-owning plantations. It suppressed all efforts on the part of the slaves themselves to throw off their shackles with the utmost brutality, until a combination of economic interests, a mass movement of the working class and the efforts of former slaves and the slaves themselves overthrew the hated institution.

The modern equivalent of slavery is the archaic and crisis-ridden system of wage-slavery, the capitalist system itself, which condemns billions to poverty and misery and has given a free rein to the pandemic. The working class can only liberate itself by building a party entirely independent of the capitalist class, based upon an internationalist revolutionary program, directed at establishing workers' power, abolishing capitalism and organizing a world socialist society.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) is the only political organisation that seeks to organize and unify the working class internationally in the struggle against capitalist exploitation, poverty, the pandemic, and war. The decisive political question today is the building of sections of the ICFI in the Caribbean and throughout the world.



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