Funding the Future

Royal reparations

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I have noted the suggestions made by the Prime Minister and John Healey this weekend that the UK might apologise for its role in slavery, but that this will not mean that reparations will be paid.

The apology for both slavery and exploitation is long overdue, and absolutely essential. The abuse of the rights of fellow human beings in pursuit of personal gain has long been considered a grievous affront to human rights and a crime, despite which official recognition of the UK's role in this activity has still not been adequately forthcoming. It is time that it was.

That said, the question of reparations is a difficult one. The reason for saying so is not that this country did not benefit from the abuse implicit in all aspects of slavery, because the evidence is overwhelming that some within it did. My point is that it was only some who benefited, and to therefore penalise all who live here now for the crimes of a few would appear to be inappropriate and contrary to natural justice.

That said, where it is clear that a link between current wealth and slavery can be established, an expectation of reparations would appear to be appropriate. I think there can be no doubt that the wealth of some people and institutions in this country now can still be quite clearly associated with the gains that they made as a consequence of their forebears' involvement with slavery, and in that case why compensation should not be required is hard to explain. Working out an appropriate basis for compensation might seem desirable now, and a particular case should be used to set a precedent.

That particular case concerns the royal family.

I think it is impossible to argue that the royal family did not benefit from slavery in accumulating the wealth that they currently enjoy, both supposedly privately and through the privileges the state affords to them.

At a time when their standing has never been lower, and questioning of their values has never been, quite appropriately, higher, this seems to be the moment for a reappraisal

of the basis on which they accumulated their wealth.

I am not suggesting that they be left in poverty. I am questioning why so many in that family, who appear to enjoy financial well-being beyond anything that their own activities might have generated or justified, should not be asked at this moment to partake in the payment of reparations, compulsorily enforced if necessary, as a necessary as well as symbolic gesture of the compensation to be made by those with power now for the abusive actions of their forebears.

If the royals might be left with only a house or two as a consequence, and might have to wear some clothes in public more than once as a result, so be it. Their privilege is unearned, and came at a cost to others. Reparations would acknowledge that fact and might also give us all the beneficial opportunity to reappraise their role in the state. That would also be welcome.

All of this is overdue, and now is most definitely the time to do it.